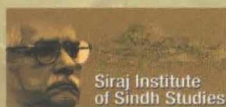


ECHO IS THE CALL

(Novel)

Siraj



Siraj Institute of Sindh Studies
Hyderabad- Karachi

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SIRAJ

Translated by

Dr Amjad Siraj Memon



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Siraj Institute of Sindh Studies (5)

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ECHO IS THE CALL *(Novel)*

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*Dedicated to the two most beautiful women,
that matter to me most:*

- *My mother Seema Siraj, for bringing
up a brat like me,*
- *And my wife Anisa, who took me from
the spoilt brat to a successful person.*

FOREWORD

“Echo Is The Call” is a historical novel written by the legendary Sindhi novelist Siraj (Sirajul Haq Memon), depicting the events of one of the darkest periods of the history of Sindh. He has fictionalized the whole scenario during the rule of Arghuns and Tarkhans in the 16th Century A.D. They were aliens for the land and to the indigenous people of Sindh, having their bloodline connected to the Mongols; and unleashed a reign of terror on the people of Sindh during their rule.

Siraj has used the literary genre of ‘historical fiction’ in which the plot of the story takes place in a setting located in the past, portraying the culture, morals, manners and social conditions of the people during the 16th century. Through this novel the author has presented a fictionalized account of the resistance movement of the people against the atrocities and oppression of their foreign masters. In his attempt to enlighten youth and the readers of present Sindh (and elsewhere), he has recreated the era with emphasis/embellishment to make people aware of the atrocities and claustrophobia they were facing in his contemporary times under the military rule of the Generals.

Although the story and characters of this novel are not real or historical, but the events, intrigues and coercion tactics employed by the rulers are real and factual, recorded in the literature and folk lore of this land. In this part of the world history has always been written or concocted by the paid scribes or court historians to eulogize their masters' misdeeds and acts of violence against their subjects, as deeds of exceptional courage and bravery. Siraj felt the need to put the record straight through this fictional work, by unfolding the events, injustices and the resultant resistance by the common folks; glimpses of which can be seen in the folk and classical poetry of great and wise poets of that period, as well as in some of the semi - historical accounts written by locals.

Siraj had also penned a sequel to the same story in two more novels: "O Death Come with Me" and "Thirsty Land and Passing Clouds", thus creating a trilogy of his novels for the first time in Sindhi literature. This series of novels created interest in the history of Sindh and encouraged the movement of romantic nationalism. These novels played important role in the popular resistance movements during and after the military rule of General Ziaul Haque.

Echo Is the Call was written as *Paraddo So ee Sadd* in Sindhi, and has been translated by Siraj's talented son Dr. Amjad Siraj. This translation was initiated on the desire of some Hollywood producer, who after hearing about it from someone in the U.S

had contacted Mr. Siraj with an intension of making a film based on this novel. After his death the family has no clue about the producer. We hope that with the publication of this English version, the concerned producer may read or hear about it from the same source or someone else, and fulfill his desire of making a film based on this masterpiece of Sindhi literature.

The Board of Directors of Siraj Institute of Sindh Studies appreciates the Chairman, Directors and Secetary of Endowment Fund Trust, Karachi (EFT), for their support to the SISS which has helped us to operate this Institute on firm footings. SISS has so far published six books by Siraj including two English and four Sindhi books, since the setting up of the institute on his second death Anniversary on 2nd Feb. 2014. Research on his other works is underway and hopefully three more books will be available shortly.

We hope that the readers will give their feedback after reading the books; it will help us in our future endeavours.

Dr. Fahmida Hussain

24th Oct, 2015

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

If my previous translations seemed to me a big task, this one was certainly huge. It is all about Sindh and its heroes, their plight at the hands of foreign invaders, who left no stone unturned to loot, plunder and murder this civilization. Every place has a different nature of living, thinking, writing etc and the ways of the Sindhi people are terribly hard to translate for the foreign reader who would perhaps even misunderstand some ideas.

A difficulty worth mentioning was the abnormal delay caused in translating this book, and the principal reason was that during the process of translation, I got so engrossed and emotional about the story, I would read page after page as if I was there for reading and not translating it. I have no problem in admitting that at so many places, my eyes were full of tears and I felt this knot in my throat on reading so many passages. If it were a movie, the scenes would not have had the effect these words had on me. It was a maddening experience to say the least. Why, I wondered! Why do nations invade other nations and their sovereignty, why do they kill innocent human beings?

One has to remember that this is a book of

historical fiction and has been written to highlight the atrocities of various kinds that have been committed against the people of Sindh. The strength of the plot is such that the characters appear so real.

It was my wish to get this translation published and one of the most important reasons was to get a pat on the back by none other than the author, who is my father. Fate did not allow that as he passed away on 2nd February 2013 and I shall not get that pat on the back from him. But I am sure he is watching us and I am also sure he must be very happy today. The pain of losing him is simply too much to describe. This manuscript is proof of a legacy that I will ensure continues in one form or the other.

I dedicate this translation to my father. Baba!
This is a gift for you.

Dr. Amjad Siraj Memon

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

(Written for the 1st edition)

Like the history of every oppressed nation, the history of Sindh is full of stories of extreme oppression, but in this history the worst period belongs to the era of Arghuns and Tarkhans. During the period of Shah Beg Arghun, the atrocities against Sindh were of such magnitude that a poet expressed its intensity from "Kharaabi-e-Sindh" (*ABIAD: A type of writing system where each symbol always or usually stands for a consonant, leaving the reader to supply the appropriate vowel*). In the Tarkhan era, the period of Mirza Baqi was one of extreme darkness as well as that of a slight enlightenment; the darkness being due to the ruler's severest atrocities and of enlightenment because the Sindhis as a nation attempted a most disciplined rebellious insurgency. The details of this planned and united effort is not recorded in the annals of history of Sindh. Although one can find isolated and random collections in the form of short pamphlets and in some poetic verses, I feel they contain links to a great freedom movement. This story is also about those great events.

The author of 'Tarkhan Nama' writes, "During the reign of Mirza Baqi, the people of Sindh did not get a single night's sleep".

Writing about Mirza Baqi, Pir hisamuddin Rashdi, a famous historian of Sindh had this to say, “---these notables were the only dead and martyred souls for the historians. Otherwise hundreds of innocent souls were butchered on the orders of Mirza Baqi. Not a single day went by when someone was not hanged. It was a daily routine to chop someone’s nose, head, hand or arm. His most favourite ritual was to get people trampled under elephants’ feet. The day Mirza Shah Rukh died, he had all the women’s’ breasts chopped off and cats were forced into their trousers, the idiomatic use of the threat of having “cats in women’s’ trousers” in Sindh, is a remnant of this inhuman and barbaric punishment of those days.”

In reaction to these atrocities and murderous activities, the Sindhis revolted many a times, and that for a great cause of liberation. It was considered an ideal and I have given this ideal the form of this novel.

گاہی گاہی باز خوان این قصہء پارینہ را

(Persian verse: gahay gahay baaz khwaan een qisa e paarina ra!)

Meaning: from time to time, revisit this old tale afresh.

Karachi. 3rd April 1970.

1

Sodhal withdrew his hand from the bellows, and wiping away sweat from his forehead stared at Jeewan while putting the red hot metal on the anvil. Tiny sparks erupted from the hot iron and their crimson color faded in the cool air. Jeewan felt, in Sodhal's eyes, a fire much more intense than the sparks emanating from the iron. He was terrified and hastily spitting on his palms he grabbed the sledge hammer firmly in his hands. Lifting the hammer above his head with a grunt, he battered at the plough metal with all the might he could muster. He realized that either the iron was not hot enough or had cooled because of his delay in striking the blow, that had widened the blade of the plough and its tip had bent up a little. He hit two more blows when Sodhal indicated to him to stop. He placed the hammer on a side and sat down on a small wooden platform gathering his breath. Sodhal put the hot metal in the water and with a sizzle the iron cooled. Jeewan was certain that unlike the axe, Sodhal's heart was still on fire, and his rounded blue eyes were showing the inferno. Whenever he was irritated, Sodhal never spoke and just kept grinding his teeth as if ready to eat someone alive. He was not used to small talk and Jeewan always had to find some reason to

start a conversation or face his reproach on the idle talk. He was not sure of the basis for his annoyance and while he was trying to make something out of it, he saw Haji Baba approaching. Mumbling a silent prayer Haji Baba entered the cottage. The fire in Sodhal's eyes was now evidently more intense and without returning the visitor's salutation, he said. "What brings you here?"

On hearing that, Haji's mumbling took a feverish intensity. Jeewan was apprehensive of how Sodhal would react next as Haji Baba was a Tarkhan and spotting a Tarkhan was known to fire the flames of abhorrence in Sodhal.

Haji took a seat without invitation and grudgingly said, "Ameer Khan has asked you to see him".

"Why?"

"How would I know? Must be something—!"

"I am busy."

Lowering his eyelids while moving the beads of his rosary, he replied, "Sodhal do not be so egoist, obstinacy with Ameer Khan is not good."

Sodhal did not respond. He deposited his hand on the cylinder of the bellows and started pumping it. Haji Baba glanced at him and closing his eyes said, "He wants to talk to you, even if you have to be persuaded

as you were once friends."

"I have no friends—"replied Sodhal pumping harder on the duct. The fire in his eyes was just as intense as the blaze of the furnace.

"Perhaps I should not say but I imagine it concerns your brother", Haji said this as if he had just uttered a secret.

Sodhal imagined, 'what could that piece of filth want from me? What is it about my brother? Does he want to breathe life into old animosities? Or is it a new fire that he desires to ignite!?' He pondered for a while and said slowly, "okay, you can leave. I shall come this evening."

With his glances shifting between the burner and Sodhal and moving the beads of his rosary Haji Baba parted. Jeewan was particularly cross with this Tarkhan, as his arrival always incensed Sodhal. He posed to know nothing but everyone knew that he was an informer and intriguer of Tarkhans and had connections going up to Mirza Baqi. He was in his wonderings about Haji Baba. when he heard Sodhal who said, "Jeewan, go get the horse saddled—!"

Sodhal stretched and straightening his back, stood up after Jeewan left for the mare. Tall with a stern heavy set face, blue eyes, dark bushy eyebrows with a broad forehead, Sodhal gave a look of someone who was perpetually angry with someone. His dark

moustache, a prominent jaw and sturdy muscular torso were known to scare his foes. Thinking about Ameer Khan, he frowned. He remembered his first meeting with Ameer Khan. It was from Mirza Isa Khan Tarkhan's years of rule when after pillaging Thatta the foreigners were in the process of smoldering the town all around and all set to return to waiting boats that were full with their loot. Taking advantage of the arson, many Tarkhans and Arghun leaders were also prowling areas thus far left untouched by the fleeing invaders.

Sodhal and his gallant assembly of native warriors were galloping towards Thatta when they saw a contingent of Ameer Khan coming from Jhirk. Sodhal hid behind a mound and instructed his men to take cover, and he took to the main front. The Tarkhan party was closing in amidst a cloud of smoke and sand and as soon as the first rider crossed him, he held the reins of the horse with such a mighty that the poor creature was bent at its front hooves and losing balance threw its rider on the sidewalk, where Sodhal was ready for him. He asked, "Who are you?" Seeing the giant of a man confronting him, the rider straightened up and said, "I am a Tarkhan and am the pilot rider of Ameer Khan."

"Where are you coming from?"

The sound of the approaching horses and men behind them brought a new-found courage in the rider

and he shouted, "Who are you and how dare you stop me?"

"I asked where you are coming from." Sodhal said that with an unyielding stance that took the rider's wits away.

"Foreigners have invaded Thatta, and that is where we are headed."

"How many men are you?"

"About a hundred or so "just as the rider was concluding his sentence, Ameer Khan and his party arrived at the scene. Seeing his pilot rider roughened up and the horse lying flat on the ground, Ameer Khan drew his sword and advanced.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Sodhal did not answer. Looking at this youthful man he knew at first sight that he was unlike other Tarkhans and Arghuns. Somehow he could not bring himself to hate him and observing his audacity, he felt a sense of respite that there was amongst the Tarkhans at least one, who had the courage to come to the fore like that.

"Sodho is my name and I am a blacksmith."

"What made you get in the way of our pilot rider? and harm his horse? Taimoor Khan, arrest this man!"

Sodhal wanted to smile at the valour of this youth but smile was something he had long forgotten. He kept staring at this cavalier young Kandhari with a bizarre curiosity. One of the Tarkhans inched his horse from the middle rank and came towards Sodhal. He had a sword drawn in one hand and with the other he started opening the rope. While he was still releasing the rope from the saddle, there was a hiss and an arrow hit him in the arm that was holding the rope. He screamed and throwing away the sword he held his arm in pain. Ameer Khan was dazed. Sodhal was furious at his men who had attacked without his signal. He came forward and pulled the dart out from Taimoor Khan's arm, and tearing away a long piece of cloth from the rag at his saddle, applied it on the wounded man's arm to stop the bleeding.

"Haste does not always hold good judgment, Ameer Khan!" and then with a swift glance at Ameer Khan, he started back for his mare.

Rage exuded from his eyes, Ameer Khan decidedly registered in his heart, the start of long life hostility with Sodhal. Two of his men had been wronged and there could not have been any worse humiliation and all of a sudden like an angry panther, he shouted, "Here, get ready!" and waved his sword aimed at Sodhal's head. Despite having his back to Ameer Khan, he sprang from his position with a lightning speed and the sword missed him by inches.

Had he not been quick, the sword would have split his body in two pieces. Turning the horse, Ameer Khan attacked again. With that all his men had their swords geared up for action. They knew that Ameer Khan had such a craft that hardly one could survive his sword's onslaught but Sodhal however had saved himself. On the next movement of Ameer Khan, Sodhal leapt and held Ameer Khan from his waistband and lifted him from the saddle throwing him on his riders. The horse saw Ameer Khan and raised its front legs almost demounting its rider. Ameer Khan's turban opened up at its fold and lay under the rider's horse. He had never been insulted like this and the loathing for Sodhal took roots deep into his heart and soul. His fall made all his men draw all their weapons and they were ready to barge on Sodhal. Ameer Khan stood up and hiding his torment started fumbling with his loosened waistband. He indicated to his riders to move forward and since Sodhal had his back to them, the mare came to Sodhal, anticipating trouble. From the eyes of the mare, Sodhal sensed the threat and caressing the mare's withers turned around to see all the swords ready to tear him apart and were advancing in the form of a circle.

Sodhal blurted, "Ameer Khan, do not invite a death spell on your party; on the slightest provocation my men will surround you like wolves and you won't know before you're all converted into pieces of meat."

Ameer Khan and his party froze. He put his

sword back into its sheath and his men followed suit. The Tarkhans suddenly realized that Sodhal had his little army with him who would not take long to send them to the next world. They were trembling at the thought of what would have happened, had they actually attacked Sodhal. Ameer Khan wore his fallen turban and approached Sodhal. The fury in his eyes was replaced by the cunning tactics he knew well. Coming near Sodhal, he extended his hand to him and said, "Sodhal Khan, I have always kept brave men as friends, let us swap our turbans in accordance with the Sindhi custom."

Sodhal remained quiet. To swap a turban with a Tarkhan was unimaginable for any Sindhi. Two swords can never be housed in a single sheath. He looked at the extended hand with a frown and saw his intrigue filled eyes and those of his men, but he could not get around taking Ameer Khans hand.

Changing his tactics Ameer Khan said, "I have heard that Sindhis never return a hand of friendship, I stand defeated and returning my hand does not reflect on your traditions."

Reluctantly, Sodhal took his hand and shook it. Ameer Khan felt his hand into a steel grip, a grip he had never felt with other brave men he had known.

"Where are you headed?"

"I have heard that alien pirates have invaded and surrounded Thatta, that's where I am headed."

"We are going there too. His Highness Mirza Sahib has gone to attend the mutiny of Sultan Mahmood and there are not sufficient soldiers in Thatta to secure the city."

Sodhal felt like saying that one scavenger was worrying about the booty left by the others and amidst the fight of two bulls, the poor Sindhis are being crushed under their feet, but he did not utter any word. Mounting his mare he waved at his men to get ready.

Ameer Khan said, "In the name of God, let us all join hands and rescue the people of Thatta from the invaders---."

Sodhal's mind had already flown to Thatta where while prowling the city, the invaders were also firing at innocent men, women and children with their shot guns and pistols. Ameer Khan and Sodhal rode in unison and with lightning speed. Sodhal's mare appeared to dash faster than it could, frothing at the corners of its mouth. The sound emanating from the nostrils of the mammal was a show of all the exertion involved. Approaching Thatta, Sodhal felt dismayed with nature that had permitted such an incredible capital turn into flames and clouds of smoke. Ubiquitously there were sounds of timber cracking in homes bringing the structures down and of firearms

mixed with screams of inhabitants.

“Sodhal Khan, let us take the course to the river. It appears that they are in a rush to leave and their boats are all set to cruise.”

Sodhal responded by turning the mare around and with his men left for the river through the woods. The horses were galloping in uniformity and the terrain shook with them. On reaching the jetty, they noticed six or seven vessels had already left the quay. Sodhal, with extreme anguish, noted the remaining three boats which the Portuguese were filling up with the loot and were perchance waiting for some of their men. On spotting these boats, Sodhal declared, “Do not let these swines leave!”

At once thirty odd arrows found their targets on the harbour. Chaos reigned everywhere. In return the Portuguese loaded their carbines and started firing. Sodhal saw a few men running with pistols towards the quay and said, “Ameer Khan, you take your men and see to it that they do not get away!”

Ameer Khan complied and his men left and launched their assault on their targets. A scheme came to Sodhal's mind that was anticipated by the mare and it came to a stop near the end of the wharf. Sodhal, with his dagger held between his teeth dismounted and jumped into the river. His men were raining arrows on the fleeing foreigners. The clatter of the

pistol fire was causing the horses to panic so a lot of Sodhal's men too entered the waterfront.

On reaching the hull of the nearest vessel, Sodhal took his head out of the water and looked around. The boat side was way too high to climb. The only place where he could advance was through the dock staircases that led to the boat but it was heavily manned by the Portuguese. He dove again and came out on the other side of the hull. One of the guards was leaning on a very big chain that was anchoring the boat. Lifting himself on a small board Sodhal came out of the water and pulled the guard throwing him into the water. On hearing the screams of the sentinel, his fellow guards were alerted to the point. Sodhal went below the surface and returned to the earlier spot. No sooner that he came out of the water, a guard pointed his handgun from a very close range and started shouting, "Amigo, amigo Solvay me, Solvay me...!"

The soaked figure of the heavy set Sodhal was too much for the guard and despite having the benefit of being equipped with a firearm, his hands were wobbly and he kept saying, "Solvay me..." Sodhal moved swiftly and held the guard's hand with the handgun in it and twisted it with such a might that it made the guard shriek and say, "Meya deyo..." As soon as the guard fell, intense firing started and the bullets were raining from the boat. Sensing danger, Sodhal put his dagger in his waistband and climbed

the boat heading directly to the large chain holding the boat to the docks. He tried to pull the chain but it was extremely strong. He tried again with all his might and all of a sudden the chain snapped sending Sodhal on the ground. He now had about a yard of the chain in his hand that became his weapon. Anywhere he spotted a Portuguese he would lash at the face with the chain. The result was far too apparent, there was alarm in their lines and they started running for life. Some of them hid behind the stolen wares. They even forgot their weapons. Swirling the chain, Sodhal was boisterous in the middle of the boat like a wounded tiger. He saw a small area where about ten women and a few boys were tied up with ropes. He knew these souls were a part of the booty the Portuguese sought to take with them. Among them a youthful lad, who looked about fifteen years old, stood up. His hands were tied at the back. Sodhal went to him. A Portuguese hidden behind a boat threw his switchblade at the unknowing Sodhal and had he not taken the tip-off from the boy of looking out, he would have been hit. Sodhal ducked and the dart landed on a wooden plank nearby. Sodhal took his dagger out and releasing the boys from the ropes said, "Brother, keep this knife and release the other prisoners, I shall be back soon..."

Sodhal went back to the guard who had thrown the knife and holding him by his neck, lifted him in the air and threw him against a panel. The guard hit his

head on the timber and could not even scream and lay flat. Sodhal was attacking the remaining foreigners with lashes of his new found weapon. The invaders took to their feet and started jumping into the river. Bearing in mind that the boat was now empty, he came back to the group of prisoners, who had by now had their ropes cut by the boy. Some of the women were wounded. Sodhal asked the boy, "Brother, who are you?"

"I am a Sama from the settlement of Banoon and was here visiting my grandparents when unexpectedly these invaders attacked the town. There were a handful of Tarkhan soldiers on ground but while some of them ran away, others were pillaging and robbing the areas that the foreigners had not been to. The pirates entered the houses, some men from the nearby seminary fought them in the streets but these people had bizarre weapons that I have never seen. They had fire coming out of the muzzles and could hit from quite a distance. Because of the strong resistance that the young locals put up, they started burning their houses. It was like a nightmare. After the looting and arson they abducted women. My sister who is sitting there, roughened up a couple of Portuguese with a harpoon she had, but we were no match for these burglars. They tied me up along with her..."

The youngster narrated the whole saga in a way as if it had happened to someone else. There was not a

trace of fear in him. Perhaps the rapidity with which the events had unfolded was such that he had not gotten an opportunity to be frightened. Sodhal looked at his sister; she was a charming and attractive young girl. She had a big gash at her cheek and the wound made her look dazed and vulnerable. Sodhal felt her distress and wondered how many daughters of the land were facing similar situations. There were some other women sitting along the girl and most of them were wounded. Some were showing signs of respite that their saviors had arrived. The setting sun could no more bear these sights and went behind the sea line. The boat was sliding along the current caused by the winds.

Sodhal looked at the harbor where his men had taken control of the situation after a vicious battle that had left quite a few headless bodies on the ground. Some of the invaders were jumping into the river but the arrows were following them even in water. Sodhal put his hand on the lad's shoulder and said, 'brother, God be with you. I am going to get the boat ashore and you and other boys can take your routes to home. Remember to guard the women and see them through till they are safely home.'

Gratitude and pride exuded from the faces of the relieved prisoners. Sodhal went down in the river and swam with the broken anchor line to the shore. Once docked, the women were looked after by their

brother warriors. There were people all over the docks now. Among them Sodhal saw Ameer Khan and his men approaching. They had lost twenty men but had been successful in taking some prisoners alive as well, who were being pulled by ropes by the riders.

Seeing the women on the docks the Tarkhan soldiers threw strange looks and started joking amongst each other. Sodhal knew Persian quite well but quietly listened and did not move, until a rider tried to tease a woman and pulled her towards him. That moment Sodhal's chain struck him on his shoulder and his back and he fell from his horse doubled up in pain. Sodhal whispered to himself. "Aliens will always be aliens, be those Portuguese or Kandahari---!" and then roared, "Ameer Khan, control your men or you surely know what we are capable of!"

Ameer Khan was ashamed by the blunder of one of his men, he dismounted from his horse and came to Sodhal and putting a hand on his shoulder, he said, "had you not punished him as he deserved, I would have most definitely beheaded him with my own sword."

"These women are our honor, Ameer Khan! And for that we will fight your army if we have to---!"

"No doubt! Absolutely---!"

Sodhal felt there was a two-faced taunt in Ameer Khan's remark. But presently Sodhal's mind

was someplace else. He was apprehensive that the Tarkhans will take all the stolen goods, weapons, jewellery and other things from the rescued boats. This was the property of Sindhis, their hard earned possessions which the Tarkhans would take like scavengers.

Ameer khan had read his mind and said, "Sodha Khan, we will take control of all the stolen goods and keep them safe until we find the real owners. Till then they will remain in state's possession."

"These things belong to the Sindhis and only they will look after their things." Sodhal replied briefly.

"How can that be permitted? We are officials of the state, I am the deputy governor of Jhirk, so this stuff will remain under my command," Ameer Khan declared with authority.

Sodhal paid no heed and signalled his men to take control. He said, "Sobha, Qaboolia, Sheru, ----- get control of the goods on the boats."

Sodhal's men got off their horses and started towards the boats when Ameer Khan too asked his men to do the same. Sodhal went behind him and held him after twisting both his hands. He took the dagger from Ameer Khan's waistband and put it on his back and said, "If anyone moves one inch, I shall put the dagger in Ameer Khan's chest---."

There was a certain air of coldness in Sodhal's words but the Tarkhans knew he was capable of doing what he had threatened. They put their weapons back on the saddles. These Tarkhans had never been disgraced like this ever. Many among them had fought wars with the locals and had thwarted numerous attempts of revolts, they had trampled the locals under the horses and some had even put red hot rods through the eyeballs of many rebels. Some were known to have killed and cut the bodies into numerous pieces. But contrary to all those, this Sindhi was different, whose body was made of steel, who had no sympathy for Tarkhans and who was known to strike without thinking.

Over the roofs and chimneys of Thatta, the sun had finally rested for the day. Qaboolio took the lead boat by a chain and connected the other boats to it and pushed them into the stream. It was not long before Ameer Khan's men saw the boats had already entered deep waters.

Sodhal gave his men a secret signal and they all took their horses and took guard of the shore line. Sodhal let Ameer Khan's hands free and removed the dagger that he had been pointing at his back. Ameer Khan caressed his arms and looked in Sodhal's eyes. His anger and surprise was drifting away now and smiling he said, "Sodha Khan, please accept to be my guest tonight!"

Sodhal agreed and with his men went to Ameer Khan's mansion in Thatta. On their way Sodhal's heart cried on seeing how the invaders had plundered the city. Every shop was on fire and they made their way coughing and choking due to the smoke and finally reached the Tarkhani Muhalla. Tarkhani area was on one side of the Jamia mosque, they had not even spared the golden covers of the minarets of the mosque. A little while after Sodhal had had a few glasses of wine, Ameer Khan reiterated his offer to exchange turbans. Sodhal was intoxicated already, and laughingly he took his turban and put it on Ameer Khan's head. The gesture was reciprocated.

"Sodhal I swear by this turban, that whatever happens between Tarkhans and Sindhis, I will never touch you!!"

Sodhal was too drunk to give an answer. Since that incident whenever Sodhal visited Thatta, he came to stay with Ameer Khan. Many of his friends did not approve of his friendship with a Tarkhan, but no one had the courage to say that to him. In the insurgency of 968 AH, Sodhal and his friends had attacked a group of Arghun lords of Mirza Isa's gang, his friends were disappointed as when the men took control and entered the tent of Ameer Taimoor, they found Ameer Khan in his tent. On much beseeching by Ameer Khan, Sodhal had pardoned Ameer Taimoor. When Sheroo shared the news with his friends, they held a meeting

of elders. Uncle Varyam, addressing the meeting on behalf of the men had said, "Sodhal, my son, Ameer Taimoor has become the main reason why the Sindhi women cannot go for shopping in the markets, as when he loiters around totally drunk, no one's honour is safe. He uses the foulest language for Sindhis and you have pardoned that mean person! This is something that we cannot put up with. How can you and a Tarkhan be friends?! And if you persevere on your friendship, at least do not spoil our efforts that have taken such a toll!"

Sodhal could not contain his anger said, "It is my choice and I shall do what pleases me."

The elderly Varyam could not remain silent. "We do not care what pleases you. Sodhal, this is about the enemies of Sindh." Varyam said this with a rather stern tone. Sodhal kept quiet and with the tip of his knife kept carving a piece of wood giving it a shape of a horse.

The elderly man spoke again. "All my life I have been fighting Arghuns and Tarkhans. When I was your age I had on my torso more cuts and wounds inflicted by their swords and spears than you have hair on your scalp. I fought the giants like Mirza Shah Hassan, and Mirza Isa had put a reward of a hundred thousand golden guineas as head money on me. I have faced them from Thatta to Bakhar but I swear to God, had my own son asked me to pardon a Tarkhan, I would

have killed him first..... And you are arguing after having pardoned a rascal like Ameer Taimoor...! Forgive me but I am starting to doubt you being a Sindhi...!"

"Stop!! That's enough uncle Varyam... Do not cross your limits....!" Sodhal blurted out and left the meeting.

And again in 978 AH revolt, when Sindhis had, with a new spirit, gathered to get rid of the noose around their necks and had gotten many men slaughtered, then too arose a situation that was a test of friendship between Ameer Khan and Sodhal. Uncle Varyam had been arrested and was to be hanged in the Sayyad square. Sodhal went to Thatta disguised as a Tarkhan and asked Ameer Khan for Uncle Varyam's release. In frenzy, Ameer Khan burst into a fit of laughter on hearing his demand, and had said, "Firstly it is beyond my authority, and I can never plead to Mirza Sahib for a Sindhi. Secondly I had given a word of not taking your life and not of the lives of Sindhi rebels. And under the present circumstances, had I not given you my word, I would not let you leave alive.....!"

The response had caused Sodhal so much anger that the clip of his sword almost pierced his palm. He got out, mounted his mare, and went straight to the square. He was wearing a Tarkhan robe and a turban. He covered his moustache and the lower part of his

face with a Tarkhani handkerchief. Thousands of people had gathered in the kiosk after hearing about the hanging of Varyam. The Sindhis present there sadly bowed their heads. Many of them worked for Tarkhans as servants. Some had deserted their clans for favours but by and large it was a crowd of Taimoori and Changezi Arghuns and Tarkhans. The crowd suddenly became alive as about 20 soldiers with their swords drawn, brought Varyam to the square. Right in the middle of the square they had erected a hanging pole. Varyam's clothes were soaked in blood; his beard too had dried blood on it making it appear horribly weird. When they brought Varyam to the landing Ameer Taimoor trotted there and addressing the crowd roared, "O Sindhis! You should know that this will be the punishment for the scoundrels who have rebelled against His Excellency!" And he waved to the hangman, who took a blindfold from board on the stall and went to Varyam to cover his face with the cloth. Varyam shook his head and looked at the platform.

Sodhal's mare neighed and then the crowd heard her gallop. Sodhal was at the gallows with a lightning speed and his spear neatly made its way through Ameer Taimoor's throat. Like an eagle he leapt and holding Varyam by his midriff lifted him on his saddle. Before the soldiers could do anything, Sodhal's mare bisected the crowd. Many a rider tried to follow them but the mare was on fire and soon disappeared over the horizon.

Since that day, Sodhal had never been to Ameer Khan's place. Ameer Khan must have something in his mind or he would not have sent for him. It appeared that the lava that had pent up in Sindhis was showing its signs and this would have burnt the Kandharis. It was like a symbol, kind of a lull before the storm, but what would this storm leave behind? Once more, Sindhis will be slaughtered, men will die, throats slashed, there would be mounds of bodiless heads, the seeds of hatred would be sown yet again and Sindh will remain in the clutches of slavery as usual!!! He looked up as if he was angry with the skies. He had in front of him the sweet façade of his beautiful motherland and he started caressing the mare's neck with immense love. He felt like the mare had in her a flicker of the soul of his land, his Sindh; that was loyal and always willing for any and every sacrifice! Sindh, his mother, his goddess; that had suffered through the centuries, be it the Greeks, the Iranians, the Sasanis, the Arabs----- and every time the honour of Sindh was at stake, hordes of Sindhis gave their lives and left a print for their motherland to live with honour! His parents and great grandparents were among those martyrs. And they were many a times born and buried in this earth to give it the sweet taste of freedom. Every time Sindh raised its head to live with honor and sovereignty, the skies had turned hostile to send it back into slavery. Why is it so? What has Sindh done? Is it because its people had a peculiar and strange habit of

loving the mankind immensely----- O God! Why?
The sweet simple folks, beautiful landscape, lovely and
purifying songs, heartwarming dances, its villages and
crops, roads alleys, its towns of Thatta, Bakhar, Aror,
Mohankot, Brahmanabad, the hills of Lakhi, Pab,
Halar, its black and white mountains, its river, the
ocean, the forests----- endless and priceless bounties
of nature and my lovely and sweet Sindhi language;
these mosques and mandirs, its folk art and music, its
shrines, its Sufis and saints, its healers and farmers, its
labourers and blacksmiths, its cobblers and masons -----
my sweet motherland Sindh, will she never be freed?

Sodhal felt overwhelmed with emotions and he
buried his face in the dark and bushy hair of the mare's
neck. He felt a warmth in the mare's embrace, that had
a similar effect on the mare too and with her feet she
started caressing the lovely earth as if she was saying,
"come my love! Let me take you to the road of Sindh's
freedom." And absorbed in emotions of love for his
land, he said, "Come dear, let's move."

2

The mare was flying as soon as Sodhal got on it. He had a heavy heart and he could not understand his own emotions and aspirations: they had, in addition to hatred and revolt, a sense of loneliness ----of Sindh! Instead of taking a ride through the town, he turned towards the fort. When he passed the huts of the Meghwar tribe, Karyo Menghwar said to his wife probingly, "It seems trouble is about to begin. This tornado will spare no one, and we might have to relocate from here."

On every uprising, it was the poor Sindhis whose huts and quarters were destroyed and burnt. Their skins were stuffed with chaff. They had faced tyranny so many times that the people of this era could tell of the impending disaster from trivial signs. When Sodhal arrived at Ameer Khan's mansion, the muezzin started the call for prayer in his special melodious tone. The sound from the nearby mosque of the Moghuls felt to Sodhal like a sign, a warning of something about to happen. Perhaps another apocalypse. The guards saw a rider coming through the entrance and at once blocked the way with their spears. Sodhal's mare did not stop at that and had the guards not moved out of the way,

they would have been crushed under its feet. Just in front of the main entrance of the house Sodhal brought the mare to a stop. On hearing the horse steps, one of the Moghul women opened the door slightly and peeped out but on seeing a Sindhi, she hastily shut the door. While Sodhal got down from the mare, the guards caught up and confronted him.

“Who are you?” One of the guards demanded.

Sodhal!” He replied briefly.

The guard fell silent. They probably knew of his arrival but were upset about the way Sodhal had behaved. One of them rang the bell hanging outside the mens’ lounge. After a brief wait, a eunuch came out to greet Sodhal and putting both his palms on his chest, bowed and said, “Sire has been expecting you.”

They entered the mansion. Just in front of the porch, there was an extremely beautiful garden with a fountain right in the middle. Water of various colours was coming through the fountain. There were numerous candles placed in miniscule holders made of ivory and onyx that lined the fountain. A sculpture of a very pretty nude woman was present on each of the four pillars around the fountain. The statues deserved admiration of their beauty and their exotic curves that left Sodhal impressed with the craftsmanship of the sculptor. This was truly art and skill at its best, where the statues stood tall as a symbol of heavenly beauty.

He remembered his sculptor friend Ratan, who used to make such figurines from ivory, onyx and glass, and how at the behest of a cleric, Mirza Isa had him stoned to death. These statues too had been made by Ratan and looking at them Sodhal felt the spirit of his dear friend calling on him to avenge his uncalled-for death.

Drawing his attention off the garden, the eunuch urged, "My master is keen to see you", and remained there with his hands still folded and head bowed. Sodhal entered the visitors' lounge where straight ahead, Ameer Khan was reclining on a large sofa. There was a handsome Turk boy sitting beside him playing an Iranian tune on a *rubab* (violin). Ameer Khan's eyes were dosed and he was surprised to see Sodhal entering the room.

Ameer Khan smiled, "Come Sodhal, come and sit with me."

For a moment Sodhal looked around. All around there was silk-curtains, carpets, sheets and covers, all made of very expensive silk. The glass tables had liquor of all kinds in beautifully decorated flasks and heart shaped glasses to fill them.

"I am not here to sit, what is it that you wanted me for, Ameer Khan?" Sodhal said firmly.

"You look cross! Have you forgotten we are friends?" Ameer Khan said in a soft tone.

"I am not here for friendship but to hear what you have for me", Sodhal said trying to soften his stance.

"There is plenty of time to talk, let us first have a toast of our friendship, Idraki, my love! Fill our glasses with your beautiful hands!" Ameer Khan said tenderly to the Turk boy. By looking at him his eyes shone with tender love. The lad stood up and very humbly filled their glasses and presented them in a gold plated tray.

Before giving Ameer Khan his drink, he brought the glass to his lips and took a sip. Ameer Khan took his drink. The boy then was about to bring Sodhal's glass to his lips when Sodhal suddenly took the glass from his hands. He felt abhorrence at the very idea. The boy put his hand on his heart and posed in a bowing manner.

Ameer Khan gave a big laugh and said, "You, the Sindhis have not tasted this Iranian fruit, the ecstasy of which only we can tell."

"You can have your fruits as you wish to, just let us Sindhis be!" Sodhal hinted subtly and sipped his wine.

They kept drinking; the wine was having its effect on Sodhal. The liquor was not enough to cool his thoughts that were now reaching new peaks. The more he drank, the lighter he felt. He felt the spirit of his dear friend Ratan restlessly roaming the room and

whispering to him, "Sodhal, you were a friend I boasted about, when will you avenge my murder?" And along with that he was reminded of countless other sons of Sindh who were butchered by the Tarkhans. They were now all around him, talking to him, "Sodhal, when will you draw blood?" These whispers echoed in his mind, his heart and he felt a strange unrest in him. He could not bear it anymore and stood up. He looked at Ameer Khan and said, "Ameer Khan, what is it that you want from me? What's all this about my brother?"

Ameer Khan woke up from his stupor. The wine had warmed him and he said, "Sodhal, forget all that. You are my friend. Come sit here and I shall show you a unique thing-----" and then addressing the boy he said, "Love! We wish to be alone."

The Turk bowed and showing extreme respect left the room. Ameer Khan motioned Sodhal to take a seat and clapped his hands. The eunuch entered noiselessly and stood there with bowed head. "Tell the mistress that we are waiting for her!" The eunuch was stunned with disbelief and stood confused.

"Suleman, I am not in a habit of repeating myself!" Ameer Khan was furious.

"Yes----- yes my Lord!" He bowed his head even further and went to the harem just behind the room they were in. Sodhal could not make out what Ameer

Khan was up to. Was this another of his political gimmicks? Or perhaps a new plan to incriminate him. He was still wondering when he heard the soft sound of the anklets of a woman, and then he saw the fairy princess dressed elegantly in white enter the room. Sodhal felt as if lightening had struck him. His eyes were on fire. Her shoulders and her erotic curves showing from her velvety dress drew his absolute attention. Her arched thin lips below a lovely straight nose were like a rose in a tulip garden. Her eyelashes moved and her curly long hair had given her a voluptuous look. The room was filled with her feminine fragrance that consumed Sodhal. His feelings made him wild and he felt ashamed on allowing himself to be turned on like this.

“Beloved, this is my very dear friend Sodhal. I have nothing to hide from him. Come! Come and soothe our tormented hearts with the magic of your lovely voice!” Ameer Khan made room for her on his sofa.

She glanced at him but that one glimpse caused such an intense feeling in her body; and her eyes crept from his eyes and her gaze was fixed on his broad chest as if she was trying to bury her face in an eternal embrace in his arms. That broad chest reminded her of the vast plains of Turkistan. She was in a trance and slowly and without moving her eyes from him, she took the ‘rubab’. The way she moved her neck

reminded Sodhal of his mare. Returning to her place with the musical organ, her hand brushed against Sodhal's hand and she sat on the sofa caressing the part that had touched Sodhal.

Playing the strings she started humming a melodious tune and in the milieu of the wines, her voice warmed the room. She sang a folk song from her homeland that Sodhal could feel and relate to and understand each word of it even though he did not know the language.

*"The men of my land do not touch
the virgins of occupied nations
the virgins' attempts of embracing the men go in vain,
for the want of freedom, they have no other desire,
the lasses of my land await the men,
with flowers and stars in their plaits
and stand in wait forever,
but these men do not return
as their land is enslaved,
the women have tears in their eyes,
and with loving hearts await their return,
but they are in no hurry to return,
as their motherland is enslaved,
they await all the happy moments,
until they are free again....."*

The song ended and when she looked around, she saw an intense fire burning in Sodhal's eyes, a feeling that she had felt on her first look at him. And

with mixed feelings of happiness and pain she understood how sad this brave man of this slaved country was!

“This is my Laila, Sodhal! She is the master of my heart and soul. Laila Jan, you have given us a new life with your song, I will always be indebted to you.....! Ameer Khan said gulping his glass. He had Laila in his eyes and mind and closing his eyelids, he said, “Laila, our glasses are empty...!”

She took the container of liquor and stepped towards Ameer Khan. She took his glass from his hand and smashed it on the floor. The glass fell to smithereens. A surprised Ameer Khan looked at her. Laila was up to some mischief and she smiled at Ameer Khan. She gave him the golden container and he too smiled when she asked him to drink it through the container. He put the container to his lips and took a gulp. In the next few minutes he drank quite a few mouthfuls until the liquor started dribbling from the corners of his mouth. His face went red and his eyes popped out. He could not take any more and putting the flask down he lay sprawled on the sofa.

She brought the same flask and gave it to Sodhal with meaningful eyes. He took the container and quickly emptied it. He threw the empty container in the fireplace where it crashed, intensifying the flames. Ameer Khan’s eyes darted between Sodhal and the pretty woman. Sodhal’s eyes shone from the effect the

woman had left on him. She catwalked in style towards Ameer Khan and touching his chest she said, "coward.....!" She threw the 'rubab' in his lap and left the room. Sodhal's eyes followed her to the womens' harem and kept looking in that direction.

Ameer Khan's ego was shattered just like the glass container. He was angry with himself and stood up. In order to pacify himself he started walking to and fro in the room and said:

"Sodha Khan, you must warn your brother. He has abused the Tarkhans in the market and has beaten up Ameer Kokiltash at his own living quarters. Tarkhans are furious..... and Ameer Kokiltash has sent me a message that I just delivered to you,..... You can leave now. I do not need your friendship: Suleman.....!Sodhal is ready to leave.....!"

Suleman emerged from the harem and took his position near Sodhal. Sodhal remained on his couch and said, "I came on my own will, and will leave when I want.....!"

"Sodha Khan, I have sworn not to kill you with my hands, Suleman has not. And Suleman's knife never misses.....!"

Ameer Khan was now visibly intoxicated. Sodhal kept looking towards the harem; he could still hear the woman's footsteps. Ameer Khan became furious and shouted, "Suleman, I am not in habit of

repeating myself.....!"

Suleman was gigantic, his eyes were devoid of humanity and he started like an angry bull. He then drew his knife from his waistband, and roared, "Sindhi, you have heard the master!" Sodhal pretended as if he had heard nothing. He filled another glass of wine from the bottle. He took a sip when in the glass he saw the reflection of a knife coming towards him. He ducked and splashed the liquor in Suleman's eyes. He could not see as the liquor blurred his vision. The knife landed and struck the back of the couch. Sodhal went behind him and twisting his arm, gave a blow of his knee to the eunuch's back. The eunuch doubled up in pain. Sodhal pushed him away and he landed on the same couch. The knife had gone clean through his back and came out from the other side. There was a loud scream and he fell to the floor. Kicking him over, Sodhal took the knife from Suleman's back and looked at Ameer Khan. Ameer Khan was frightened and kept still. Sodhal wiped the blade on Ameer Khans' shirt and said, "Ameer Khan, I am taking this knife as a memory of our friendship....."

Suleman's scream had alerted the armed guards who entered the lounge but stood dumbfounded on finding Suleman on the floor amidst a pool of blood. Aware of Sodhal being armed with a knife, he said to the guard, "why have you come in? Rascals, get out now.....!"

They obeyed their master and went away. Feeling the sharpness of the knife with his finger, Sodhal said, "Ameer Khan, I will deliver your message to my brother..... but if any Tarkhan touches him, you know what I am capable of.....!" He looked at Ameer khan, then towards the harem and returned through the garden to his mare.

3

Moonlit nights of a free Sindh used to be beautiful and serene. After the evening prayers, men, young and old used to turn to the open spaces and grounds and playfully wrestled and held sporting events. The older men used to bet on their favourite wrestlers. Sweets were distributed, food was served. People sang and danced on folk tunes. Musicians played their flutes and the masses enjoyed their freedom. But ever since the Kandhari invasion, Sindh was enslaved. Even on beautiful moonlit nights, people dispersed and everyone sought the safety of their homes. The preachers of the seminaries waited, in vain, for the followers so they could hold a congregation but hardly did people turn up.

It was the 16th night of the lunar month; moonlight that evening, was gorgeous, spreading its benevolence across the horizon. Sanghaar entered Akhund (teacher) Noor Muhammad's study and found that Janan Bughio, Dilawer Samo, Sahib Unar and Yaroo Soomro were already seated. Akhund greeted Sanghaar and said, "Son, it's good to see you, I welcome you, come and sit here.....!"

Sanghaar took a seat besides Akhund. Arghun

Kokiltash had recently pierced molten lead in the eyes of Janan's son and had him hanged in a well and since Sanghaar had not been to Janan for condolences, he held him by his hand and took Janan in a caring embrace.

He said: "Ada (Brother) Janan, that was God's will. He took what belonged to Him. But his death will be celebrated as he gave his life for Sindh! May his soul rest in peace and God be with you in this difficult hour....."

Janan was not that young any more. He had lost his only child who had sacrificed his life for the motherland. He was deeply hurt and his only desire at this stage was of revenge from Kokiltash. This was why he was the first one to arrive at Akhund's call. Everyone there felt and shared his pain. Whoever heard about the meeting had made sure to attend it. They offered fateha prayers for the departed soul and condoled with Janan. When all the invitees were gathered, Akhund asked for order and said:

"Sons, the fire has started again. It has been almost three years now that Sindhis have regenerated their cause for freedom of Sindh. The reason for this meeting arose when I heard from a few Tarkhans that Mirza Jan Baba is planning a revolt against Mirza Baqi. Initially Sultan Mehmood was also a part of the conspiracy, but Mirza Baqi talked him out of that and rewarded him with six virgin Turkish maids and he

left with many other gifts. Now that Mirza Jan Baba is ready to attack Thatta on his own, I feel we should help him!"

"No sir, no, after all Mirza Jan Baba is a Tarkhan and is Mirza Baqi's brother. As far as we are concerned he too is an alien. And if Mirza Baqi does not remain the ruler of Sindh, it will be Mirza Jan Baba or Shah Qasim Arghun. What difference will it make to Sindh? It looks like a too naïve a plan. If Mirza Baqi succeeds he will be harsher on Sindhis and even if Mirza Jan Baba prevails, can he be trusted?! He will consider his options, he will think that Sindhis are helping me today against Mirza Baqi, in future if some strong man among them raises his sword, the Sindhis would favour him. Therefore, enemy will always be an enemy...let us think of bringing an end to all of them." Sanghaar said matter-of-factly.

"You are right, but Mirza Jan Baba has relations with Sindhis, Samejo tribes are his in-laws. For the sake of Sindhis, Mirza Jan will still be a better option," opined Dilawer Samoo.

"How will matrimonial relationships matter? A Tarkhan will after all be a Tarkhan. Now that he has been affected, he has taken refuge with the Samejas, but remember that in his father's reign, when these very Samejos had gone to him with a complaint, he had plainly turned them down." Sanghaar was known to be blunt when he did not agree with a view point.

Sniffing his snuff, the Akhund spoke again, "My objective is not to help Mirza Jan to become the ruler of Sindh. More than half of his army is made up of Unars and Samejos, they are our own blood. We can engage them in a dialogue. And if Mirza Jan wins with the help of those men, it would not be difficult to dethrone Mirza Jan Baba," Akhund Noor Muhammad was imagining Sindhis to be the rulers.

"Is there any one among the Sindhis who could replace him once we get rid of Mirza Jan?" Janan spoke for the first time.

"Brother! That is a question worth millions! Our own Feroz Samo did not bear fruit; in fact he made matters worse after he left. There is not one leader who enjoys the trust of all the tribes, who could be handed over the reins." Dilawer Samoo said. Mentioning Feroz Samoo he had ground his teeth. It was because of Feroz's cowardice and misdeeds that Sindh had lost her freedom after 600 years of her self-rule.

"Lads! Will Sindh not be freed if we do not have a leader? Throw the invaders out and something will come up. If Sindhis elect 5 or 6 men as rulers, why would they not function? These Sardars and monsters are the reasons for the sorrows of Sindh. It was a rift among the Sama clan chiefs that led to problems and they got their necks in the noose in the form of Shah Baig." Akhund Nur Muhammad's words were always full of wisdom; people adored him and held him in

great esteem. He had foresight and was not any ordinary preacher who people had stopped believing in.

Akhund was indeed the vanguard of nearly all the revolts. It was due to him that the pupils of seminaries, schools and other centers of learning were having education and whenever needed, these students had a major role to play. It was remarkable that even the Tarkhans used to respect him. So much so that a miserly and mean Mirza Baqi had sent him shields and had asked him to become an advisor to Paenda Baig. His wisdom and behaviour was such that no Tarkhan ever suspected him to be anything but a teacher and scholar. Famous honourable men of Sindh used to gather at his place; and that too in such a way that no one ever knew their whereabouts. His fame had reached Humayoon and later Akbar the Great. Not even a single stiff necked Tarkhan ever dared to turn him down. He had thousands of pupils and followers from Thatta to Bhakkar who were ready to give their lives on his command.

When the dust settled after a long heated debate, the Akhund declared, "The foremost thing to do is to scare the Arghun and Tarkhan leaders in such a way, that they refrain from siding with any of the warring factions. Secondly, we must send our men to secure our borders so that their supply line from Kandhar is checked. I have information that one of the

Tarkhan leaders is leaving for Kandhar, he will have to be stopped." Akhund was now speaking with authority. His eyes had a peculiar new spark in them as if the soul of Sindh was instilled in him.

"That can be done by scaring some influential Tarkhan who would know who was being sent to Kandhar. If we get the letter too, once the letter "I am ready.....", Sanghaar offered quickly.

"And I will accompany him," Janan did not want his friend to be alone.

"Sanghaar! Son, you better not go. Tarkhans have already been annoyed with you. Since your treatment of Kokiltash, I have had numerous complaints. Anyway, what you can do is find out who is leaving for Kandhar? And who is the letter addressed to? If you find the letter, that would be great. Then you can take the letter to Akhund Saleh and do as he tells you to. I will discuss this issue with Akhund Saleh, and we shall do as God pleases."

"We shall do what we can tomorrow at the first ray of light in Thatta...Okay then, bye for now!" Sanghaar stood up. Akhund Noor Muhammad joined him and staring into Sanghaar's eyes, he said, "God be with you son!" For some unknown reason Akhund Noor Muhammad felt he was seeing Sanghaar for the last time ever. Losing control he embraced Sanghaar lovingly. He felt a knot in his throat and

Sanghaa could only hear, "Jiye Sindh" (Long Live Sindh)!

Their horses were tied in the dilapidated temple behind the mosque. Sanghaa shuffled the saddle and holding the reins mounted the horse. Janan too dug his heels into the horse's side. Their hearts were heavy with past events, present conditions and vows for the future, and their thoughts were travelling faster than the speed of their horses. The ideal that was before them had sharpened their emotions and both were thinking about their personal lives.

Sanghaa was four years younger than Sodhal, but he was totally different in nature. At quite a young age he had taken to the hills after an argument with his father. There he made acquaintances of people who were engaged in robberies and burglaries. He had to become like them if he had to survive those brutal plains. Such an influence instilled in him a habit of snatching and forcing his ways as opposed to asking for it. Whatever he felt necessary for himself and at his will, he would just get it by force. But he had learnt something from his comrades; and that was never to harm someone who was weak. Having spent eight years in the mountains, he found it hard to adjust in the atmosphere of his village. His father owned some land and had some cattle too, but despite having four sons, he used to toil and plough the land by himself. Sodhal had taken up work as a blacksmith. Sanghaa

had left for the hills; the younger Dadan was taken by Akhund Noor Mohammad who had lodged him in a seminary in Multan. The youngest Dhanoo was still with him but was still a kid who had strange habits who liked to play the flute and his mouth organ (chang) endlessly. Sanghaar had no idea of dealing with cattle, and herding and managing them was too much for him, but then he had no better option. Soon he started getting better at it. If he had any spare time, he spent that in riding his red horse purposelessly.

One day he lost his way and entered a nearby village inhabited by the Samoo tribe. Somehow he managed to find his way out from the woods and was riding through the maize crops when a mud ball hit him on his neck. He braced himself and went looking for the source. Behind a tree he saw Bhagul with the catapult in her hand. She was about to pick up another mud ball when he brought the horse to a halt near her. He kept staring at her, Bhagul was terribly shy but she could not keep herself from looking at him.

“What is your name?” He asked, as if talking to a child.

“Bhagul!” She felt as if he would take her away at once if she had not replied.

“And you are daughter of?”

“Of Bhoongar Samo!”

That was all he asked. His eyes told her that he shall return, Bhagul was terrified but at the same time, for some unknown reason she knew she wanted him to come back. He returned to his village and while trying to persuade his mother, he said in his typical style, "I want Bhagul, her father's name is Bhoongar Samo."

"Son, we belong to a different tribe. Samas will never give their daughter outside their tribe." His mother tried to speak some sense into him.

"I need Bhagul, understand?! Tribe or no tribe, I do not give a damn!" He insisted.

His mother spoke to her husband that evening. The old man was furious, "Have you no shame, how can you talk about anyone's daughter like that..!

He was baffled, it was beyond his ways. He took his horse and went straight to the Sama village. He found Bhoongar's address and stopped at his house at their gate and gave a call. Bhagul was grinding flour at the hand-mill. On hearing Sanghaar's call her hands gripped the handle of the mill and she trembled. Bhoonghar went to the door. Without even offering him the usual greetings, he said:

"Uncle Bhoongar, I am here to ask for Bhagul's hand."

A rush of blood went through Bhoongar, he had never even heard of such madness. No greetings, no

pleasantries and such direct and blunt statement, "I am here for her hand", outrageous it all was. Trying to control his anger, he stared at Sanghaa and said, "Who are you?"

"I am a Sodho and my name is Sanghaa. My father is Abdullah Sodho," he said this trying to avoid the old man's stare.

"Son, what a way to dishonor your father's name. It would be best if you left, otherwise.....", a fit of rage came over him and he could not speak but his blood red eyes reflected his feelings quite clearly.

"There is no rush. You have a whole day, if you do not comply by tomorrow evening, I will take her away!" Sanghaa said this and rode away through the millet crops leaving behind a bewildered Bhoongar.

He waited eagerly until the next evening. He kept loitering in the courtyard all day. At times he took his axe in his hand but then he brought his sword from his room. His mother was alarmed and feared the worst. She knew her son and his ways. But as the day went by, he was calmer. Just before sunset, he placed his axe on the saddle. He covered the blade of his spear with a thick cloth and took some stuff to make a fire and stored it in his rucksack. He rode the horse and headed towards the Sama village.

It was quite dark now and he came to a spot near the barn where he had seen Bhagul for the first

time. There were two big mounds of chaff that were covered with a thick coating. He scrapped the coating off at a couple of places and sat there for a few moments. He ignited a fire and took his spear that had a cloth wrapped on its blade. The cloth caught fire and holding it to the spots that he had scraped, he let the chaff catch fire. The blustering winds roared further enhancing the fire and within minutes the whole barn was in flames. He went and hid in the millet crops. He saw about twenty men with swords and axes running towards the fire; and he slowly slid out from there with his horse. The screams of the men trying to stop the fire and the sound of wood cracking was so loud that his movement went un-noticed. He came to Bhoongar's house and realizing that the men were not there, he entered the house. The women were all there in the verandah and before they could do anything, he spotted Bhagul and lifted her on his horse and went away as quickly as he could.

Instead of going home, he rode towards the city. He remained there for more than six months. All this time the Samas kept looking for him and had they found him, he would have been cut to pieces but that was not to be. He returned to the village after the sixth month and sent a message to her parents, "Bhagul is my legally wedded wife, if you are still angry, you may come and take her away!" Sama elders had decided to let it go and the issue was forgotten.

Remembering his past, Sanghaar smiled on his follies and fights when he was younger. Those were the days! He thought. But then he remembered an event that stole his smile away.

He had recently returned from the city and had started working with his old man. If he had a friend, it was Roopo, the stage artist. His father owned a sweet shop, and his sweets were famous in the entire region right up to Thatta. The nawabs, Arbabs and aristocrats of Thatta used to order crates and cartons of sweets from his shop. The variety of his sweets was splendid and like his merchandise, he was known for his sweet manners. Roopo was his only son who had a craze of organizing plays and puppet shows. After a day's work at the shop, he used to accompany his friends to the village ground besides the temple or his house where he used to show his puppet games. Within no time the fame of his puppets spread to many adjoining regions and people used to travel from far flung areas to watch his performance. His Ram Leela, Moomal Rano and Laddi and Dahir became annual events that drew very large crowds. He could have earned a lot from his art but he used to say to Sanghaar, "My friend, our beloved people are mostly from the working class; after their day's work when they are tired, if I can provide them some pleasure, it is worth it. They are a pleasure to serve". But since Sindh had lost her freedom, Roopo and his friends changed their shows from love stories of Ram Leela to the plays

depicting the brave warriors as their characters, and these plays that started being organized in the whole region from Thatta to even as far as Multan. Each inhabitant, young or old came to know how Sindh was enslaved and even their Sindhi language was ignored and deprived of its due status it truly deserved. In the beginning Sanghaar kept a distance from this movement, but on repeated insistence by Roopo, he started going to these plays and shows. Hordes of men used to assemble in Roopo's small theatre (*natak-mandli*) which was always full. He and his friends used to depict different eras from the history of Sindh, bringing tears to the eyes of the spectators, and younger men used to discuss ways to deal with Sindh's problems. When these events came to light and eventually reported to the Tarkhan mayor. One evening when Roopo and his team were performing a story of Doolah Daryah Khan and Shah Baig Arghun, the mayor, accompanied by a few of his men joined the gathering. They remained indifferent during the play, but when the people noticed their presence at the end of the show, they knew this would bring trouble. And that is what happened. The mayor rode to Thatta the next day. And a few days later, Tarkhan soldiers arrested Roopo. There was unrest among people especially Sanghaar and his friends. He used to go and sit with Roopo's father and reassure him. People took the complaint to Akhund Noor Muhammad, who in turn told the Tarkhans that there would be dire consequences if Roopo was harmed. Sanghaar openly

warned the Tarkhan Mayor about repercussions.

One evening Sanghaar was at Roopo's place, where his mother offered him some papadums and sweet pie. It was Roopo's and his friends' routine to have papadums at sunset and then go to the theatre for the shows. Sanghaar was about to take a piece of sweet pie when he heard the sound of horses' hooves, a sound that was known to harbinger trouble in the Hindu households. Roopo's father stood up, he was trembling from fear of the worst. Roopo's mother started wailing. The horses came to their main entrance. His father opened the door as they knocked at it. The deputy of the village was accompanied by their men on horsebacks. They were holding three large trays. The deputy laughed and said, "The mayor of Thatta had ordered sweets and had to send back the cartons. He felt sending empty cartons as bad omen, and so he has sent some gifts and pleasantries for you!"

He signalled and the men placed the three cartons on a table. The deputy and his men laughed and went away. Roopo's father sighed relief and smiled, "did I not tell you that whoever tastes my sweets, even an Arghun or Tarkhan, he becomes humane, Roopo's mother! Have a look and see what the gifts are!"

The lady came to the table and lifted the cover of the bigger carton, and the next moment she screamed a heart rendering wail and fell on the ground. Roopo's

father and Sanghaar also saw: Roopo's open eyes on a bodiless head were staring at them. His father sobbed, he started tearing his clothes and pulled at this hair, this was his only child. Sanghaar did not know what to do. He went out and called the neighbours. The family of Sonaras (goldsmiths) came and tried to comfort the deceased man's parents. The entire village was mortified. Everyone was shocked. The older men started worrying about their sons; the young men missed their dearest friend. His funeral and final rites were attended by everyone, Muslims, Hindus and the Buddhists. The entire village was there. Returning from the shamshanghat (Hindu cremation site), Sanghaar and his friends gathered at the old masonry. They were about twenty men, Sanghaar had no words to express himself, he could only say this, "how long can we Sindhis tolerate all this, let us do something once and for all, and bring an end to this menace, the filthy Tarkhans!"

The hatred against the slavery of Sindh was now spread to every village. The youngsters were planning to do whatever they could and it was resolved that a messenger be sent to each village of Sindh. And that ten days from that day every Sindhi in villages, towns and cities should attack the Tarkhan pickets and remove the menace from the face of Sindh. Wherever the message is delivered, the people should send their own men to spread the word in other areas. Some thought of launching the attack earlier than the ten day

deadline but it was finally concluded that a day must be fixed otherwise if the effort is scattered, Tarkhan soldiers from the cantonments will be able to counter attack the villages and cause mayhem.

Sanghaa's comrades left for their cause and the word was spread. The spark of the revolt spread from Thatta, Sehwan, Bakhar, and Badin to Umerkot. People were desperately waiting for the day. Labourers, cobblers, farmers, in fact all and sundry forgot their work, they had a hope to look forward to. Children formed groups and sang verses to that effect.

*Filthy foreigners, thou shall not prevail,
Thirst of Indus will be drenched,
We will see that you are dead and buried"*

The long wait was about to end. It started drizzling on that day. People took care of their cattle early. It was like the earth was going to shake, the shops closed at noon, women locked their homes and hid their children. They had an unknown fear in their hearts, but they hoped and prayed to the skies for the sovereignty of their land. They prayed for times of peace and harmony, of spring and the green pastures, where they could yet again smile at their newly found freedom and share it with their men.

Sanghaa and his men took to their route a little before sunset, no one spoke, not knowing what were they to do and what shall happen to them. And then a

reddish hue spread on the horizon as if it was covered in blood. People saw the color of the skies and engaged in silent prayers. And then the screams and cries of Tarkhans filled the air. Sanghaar and his men crossed the ravine, and approached the Tarkhan camps. Some had spears and others had swords and axes, a few had only large wooden sticks in their hands. But the blade of their daggers was obvious in their waistbands. When they attacked the camps, the Tarkhans were unable to fathom their strength; it was a wrath from the skies. Tarkhans had around 200 soldiers while the Sindhis were hardly 20 men. The Tarkhan turbans and heads kept falling on the land of Sindh. There were bodies all around. Tearing open the chests of Tarkhan soldiers with his sword, Sanghaar headed towards the deputy's door. His guards confronted him but like a mad bull he pushed them and kept advancing. Two guards had their throats slashed by his dagger and he lifted the third one from his neck. The man was gasping for breath when he lifted him with two hands and threw him on the door. The door split in pieces and the sentry lay near the deputy's feet. The deputy wanted to draw his sword, but Sanghaar was at him before he could move. He was shaking and instead of putting up a fight, he begged Sanghaar for forgiveness. A strange thought came to his mind and Sanghaar threw away his sword and advanced towards the deputy empty handed. The deputy saw that as a lease of life and quickly stammered, "This trunk here is

stuffed with diamonds and gold. If you let me live, you can have it ...!"

Sanghaar laughed and lifted the lid of the trunk. He was astonished to see so much gold and jewels. He wondered how many Sindhis the deputy must have robbed to get this treasure. The Tarkhan deputy saw Sanghaar's diverted attention and tried to attack him with his sword, Sanghaar leapt like a panther and moved away. The Tarkhan lost his balance and fell on the trunk. Sanghaar was on him and held him by his throat, and said, "You piece of filth!"

Holding him by his throat he dragged the deputy out. The Tarkhan's face had paled; he was so sure of his imminent end that he was not even struggling to defend himself. When the soldiers saw their chief in such a state, they took to their feet and ran. But Sanghaar's men followed them until they were out of sight.

As instructed by Sanghaar, his men asked the people of the village to gather at the square in front of the mosque. They lit a big fire and tied the deputy to a pole among a circle of men. They left the villagers to decide the fate of the arrested deputy, as it was at his behest that Roopo had met his fate at the hands of Tarkhan soldiers. Some demanded that Ameer Khan, the son of the deputy be brought there and should be hanged in front of the deputy. But since Ameer Khan had left for Thatta, waiting for him was not an option.

The villagers finally decided that a hanging pole be erected there and the deputy be hung on it upside down. If he survived the night, he would be pardoned. The young kids of the village stood around him and kept taunting at him until quite late at night.

People of Sindh took a sigh of relief and slept peacefully. But everyone woke early on hearing the sound of horse riders, it felt as if the earth was shaking. The barking dogs made the sounds more horrifying. The village was surrounded by around a thousand armed Tarkhan soldiers. Sanghaar and his men got together and planned to save their village from the attackers. They knew that even if they fought they would soon be overpowered and the Tarkhans will enter their houses, so they wanted the children and the women to be safe. It was impossible to break the siege at such a short notice. All they could think was to somehow get the children and women to be sent to the mosque for safety. Sanghaar told his mother and wife Bhagul to take the other women from the neighbourhood to the mosque. The others did the same and when the women were safely inside the mosque, Sanghaar and his mates stood to defend their village. But they were no match; for one Sindhi there were more than ten Tarkhan soldiers who were fully armed with armours, swords and spears. Sindhis hardly had some axes, sword and sticks but they were few and far between as compared to the number of Tarkhan soldiers. Sanghaar kept roaring and riding on his red

horse and attacked the Tarkhans. His men had sworn to either kill or die fighting. The whole saga went on till morning; eventually the Sindhis were outnumbered and started falling. Sanghaar was soaked in blood, and a spear thrown from a distance lodged itself in his shoulder and he lost consciousness. He laid flat on the saddle and as the reins were set loose the horse started its flight. Blood spurted from his shoulder on to the withers and then trickled from the horse's belly. The horse entered a ravine and headed for Sama village. The news of this battle had reached the Samas who were getting ready to defend their own village against any possible onslaught. The horse brought its master to the village and stopped in front of their houses, as if trying to say, "this is my master, please take care of him....." When the Sama men recognized him, all the pent up anger of the past was washed away by Sanghaar's blood. Bhoongar took the injured man to his home.

The Tarkhans burnt hundreds of small villages during that revolt. They burnt the barns and godowns full of grain. Young and old, whoever came their way, they put a spear through him. The blood of Sindhis seeped into the rivers, converting the Indus River into a crimson sea of blood. There was not a single household where one or two men had not been killed. Thousands of Sindhi virgins were taken by Tarkhans as slave girls.

When Sanghaa's wounds healed and he returned to his village, there were so many faces he did not find. Very few of his friends had survived and that too after a very prolonged and painful recovery. Janan was one of them. Remembering the past events he looked at his old mate but the latter kept staring in space, trying to find something and Sanghaa knew that he was trying to find his only loving son. He was talking to the spirit of his only child who was no more...

Janan's tribe had dwelled between Darro and Banoon for centuries. Most of them were related with agriculture, cattle farming or manual labour. They owned their dairy settlements, agricultural fields yielding crops of wheat, cotton and their cattle had made them self sufficient in wool and dairy. They were pretty much well-to-do people, possessing all the basic needs of life. God had given them everything. They drank, dined, played different sports, wrestled and lived happily. The women were well bred, clever and skillful and they engaged in knitting, weaving yarn, making bags and purses from leather, they ground their own flour and chatted with their friends in the evenings while spinning on their spinning wheels. Their lives were simple, never interfering in other peoples' lives. If they had any problems, they too belonged to their own tribe, their discussions revolved around their own good men, young girls, crops and lands, their cattle and children. The only worry was related to their youngsters who were, every now and then, known to join different small armies. When the Soomras ruled Sindh, they joined their army, and in the Sama period they served as warriors of the Sama tribe. Upon their return, some would bring with them loads

of gold and silver, silk and fine velvets, copper and zinc utensils, silver slippers, saddles and dresses and embroidered saddle covers. They would be full of stories of bravado and comradeship of their friends in the army. These youngsters were the choice of many a woman. The elderly women would, in wintery nights, gather around a fire, covered in warm shawls they would spend hours talking about their men and the love stories of their youth. The young lads who learnt about these stories sought to join such armies in the future where they could prove their bravery while their fiancées waited and prayed for their early and safe return.

But ever since the Kandharis had attacked and hovered over Sindh like locust, these stories had lost a major link. There were no more story-telling and no progress and prosperity left in the people. They knew about their past but no one was sure what future held in store. The older wise women would only now and then repeat the stories of brave men of the past but in a taunting way, pointing to the want of such men in these troubled times. Then these stories were lost and their lives were confined to hard labour only. People could not understand why men were so distressed and the atmosphere so gloomy. Where were the men who were once longed for? Where had the stories gone, why life had no charm, where had all the smiles gone? But they knew it had all started since the invasion by the foreigners. Sindh before that belonged to their own

people not to these Kandharis who were seen everywhere, sometimes called Arghuns and Tarkhans. And every time a new tribe arrived from Kandhaar, or from Iran through Multan, calling themselves Tooranis, Taimoories, Shirazis, Hiraaties, Moghuls and sorts. Some came in the form of preachers and missionaries, some as merchants and traders, others were warriors and mercenaries. Every one of them showed their ancestors to be related to the Tarkhan and Arghun leaders, some as nephews, others as uncles, whoever spoke Persian was a relation of the state!

In the wake of the new rulers of the state, like the other tribes, Janan's folks too lived and laboured like ants. Older men were advised that if they could keep their youngsters within their homes, no harm would come to them. They dwelt on this concept. In order to hold them, the boys were married as they got to adolescence and those young lads were busy with their new-found beloveds, tilling at their crops and living that stale and stagnant life. These men were not really as happy as the older men had been in their own youth. The older the youth was getting, there were visible signs of boredom of a monotonous life. At times the older generation retorted and said, "The times have changed, you do not have in you the passion which we once had!" They could not elaborate on it even though they were very close to uttering the truth.

And then the times changed and the skies and

the air smelled of blood. Wheat crops were being harvested; the barns were full of grain. Men came to the harvest and took their share according to who had tilled the most. Labour was divided not the produce. One way or the other, they were of the same kin and no one ever thought of arguing on a piece of land or a measure of grain. After giving the blacksmith, the mason and the preacher of the mosque their stipulated share, the rest of the produce was evenly distributed among the families of the village. This year the yield had broken all previous records and the whole region was rejoicing. The elders were engrossed in chatting when they saw a cloud of sand coming from the far end of the horizon like a tornado. But this tornado had in it a sound of horses. The older men, who had seen and fought wars in their times, knew that these sounds were not friendly. They feared that the younger lot might start what may take a very bloody turn, so they told all the young men not to reply to anything and leave any negotiations to the older folks.

Just about then, they saw the pilot rider. Tarkhans were always recognizable from a distance; he was followed by about 50 other Tarkhan soldiers. One of them came forward and stood near the collected pile of grain and said something in Persian.

“We do not know that language, soldier! Speak in Sindhi”, said an elder.

One of the soldiers came forward and after

talking to his chief, faced the crowd and said, "These lands belong to Amir Kokiltash and so does this produce, and we are here to collect it."

Such an utterance was unthinkable. What a turn the times have taken that peoples' crops had become insecure! One of them, obviously surprised by what he had just heard, said: "Son, we have lived here for centuries, our proud great grandfathers were from here and we are not aware of anyone else owning these lands."

"These lands originally belonged to the Samas. We have taken over the reins of the state from them, and thereafter, His Excellency has granted this estate to Ameer Kokiltash," the soldier explained.

"Lad, have fear of God above?! How could these lands belong to the Samas? No one has ever demanded it and neither will they do ever. This land is ours from the beginning of times. Our ancestors toiled on it, ploughed it, grew crops on it and we have given our life for it to flourish. And now our younger generation is looking after it, how can this belong to someone else when we grow and plough it, how can that be?" The older men argued.

The sentry muttered something to his chief and said, "The state will deliberate on your rights. But this estate belongs to Ameer Kokiltash, so half the produce is his legal right, you can have one fourth of the

remaining produce and the other fourth will have to go to the state."

There was unrest among the villagers. The youngsters felt the strain and their hands groped for a weapon but the elders restrained them so they remained quiet. But their eyes were fixed on the soldiers. They were thinking: "one man is other's equal, who has given them the right to fetch our grain like that!"

The elders whispered to each other, they knew that the soldiers had come for something that they will ensure they get it, and despite persuasion the younger men will retaliate. Finally one of the elder men said, "Look, this matter will not be resolved like this, you seem to have travelled quite a lot. I think you should sit down and have some rest. Have food and then we can try and sort this matter out. The grain is all there, it's not running away!"

The soldiers thought that the villagers had realized their might, and since they had come from quite a distance so they took the offer. The sentry explained it to his chief in Persian; they needed wagons and bullock carts to take the crops, which will have to come from the village and that required some diplomacy on their part. The chief agreed and they camped there for the night. The elders sent some lads to their homes to arrange for dinner. They were known for their hospitality, they did not want these people to

get the impression that the Sindhis did not even offer them a meal.

A few goats were sacrificed and the arrangements for the dinner started. Women baked bread and men served the food. The youngsters were not amused at all this; especially Janan's son Umer was very restless. He was known to be arrogant in such matters. He did not heed the elders' advice. Even his father refrained from advising him and his uncle Naboo used to laugh at him and say, "Brother, since this boy has been to town a couple of times, his reins are unreachable. He keeps talking about Sindh and none else. Sindhis are this, Sindhis are that, as if the entire Sindh has become his responsibility."

Umer winked at his friend and signaled them to meet him at the playground. One by one, his friends slipped out, and when they were about 20, Umer said, "I have always been telling you that this foreign serpent will sting us some day, now you have seen and heard it all. What do you say?"

"Whatever the friends resolve, but what about our elders?"

"The elders will say what they did to the Tarkhans. They will agree to give them half of the yield, then they will ask for three quarters and ... in the days to come they will take our honor, our women right in front of our eyes! It will not be long before they

distribute our women among themselves!" Umer was on fire and the flames were felt by all his friends.

"It is our land, we have toiled it, we grow crops and someone else comes and takes it! We would rather kill ourselves," another youngster said emotionally.

"It is true, if we kept quiet today, these Tarkhans will be here every time our crops are harvested," opined another adolescent.

"...and then...it would be our cattle, they will pick and choose from our cows and buffaloes, which will become state property!" Umer could not control himself. He wanted to say something but thought and chose to stop at that.

"This is unheard of, saying that the Samas left for Kachh and gave them our lands as if they owned it. Our ancestors gave their lives and they are buried here, they are part of our heritage. Those people laboured all their lives straightening the hilly plains and made the region fertile; do they not know all that, don't they?" One of them complained.

"Look friends, our men gave their life for their honour. This land is like our mother, we will not let them touch what is ours until we have any sign of life in us, be it a Tarkhan or anyone. If you will not help me I will fight them with my bare hands!" Umer told them about his decision.

The crowd was moved, "We are all in it together, and they will have to kill us to take our crops."

"So then let this be the final decision. Either they kill us and take the yield or our axes will be soaked with their blood and be decorated!" Umer said rising from where he sat.

Everyone brought his axe from home. When the women saw their sons taking up arms they were alarmed. "O Lord! What is going on with our kids? What are these axes for?" They started praying to the Creator, "Dear God, for the sake of the Holy Prophet (pbuh) , look after our children and secure them from evil eyes." They prayed endlessly for the safety of their children.

After finishing the meal, the Tarkhan who spoke Sindhi addressed the elders and demanded bullock carts to load their cargo of grain. He also said that instead of three parts they will only take half of the yielded crops as was the custom of farming in Sindh. Elder men's' heads were bowed; they did not see any other way but to tolerate this fate. When the soldiers went to the heaps of grains, they saw about 20 odd men armed with axes guarding the produce, and when their eyes met the soldiers', knew they were hostile.

Seeing their sons armed with axes surprised the elders. Janan asked his son, "Son! Umer what is all this?"

“Baba, if the Tarkhans take this away while we just sit here, that life is not worth living!”

Janan and others stood there totally confused, they knew the young men were right. There were times when they had fought wars with the Tarkhans. Looking at the confused elders, the Tarkhan soldier said, “Tell them off or there will be bloodshed!” He spoke slowly but the threat in his voice was only too obvious.

All of a sudden the Tarkhan chief raised his sword and advanced his horse. The axes too were raised and started finding their targets. Being in front, one or two elders were injured first and fell to the ground, the rest did not know what to do and picked up anything they could that could be used as a weapon and joined their young sons to defend the village. There was chaos everywhere. The sounds of horses, swords and axes, injured Tarkhans and the shouts of the villagers produced a mayhem that echoed to far flung areas. Umer’s axe struck the Tarkhans like a lightning. The men were using their axes as if the axes had a life and knew where and when to hit. Janan was unarmed; he ducked an attempt on his life by a Tarkhan and holding him by his waistband, threw him ferociously on another Tarkhan. He took a sword that lay on one of the fallen soldiers and as he was stretching, a sword of a Tarkhan soldier cut his hand from his wrist. Janan doubled up in pain as the

Tarkhan raised his sword again, but the soldier's arm remained where it was when one of the Sindhis' axe slashed his back and he fell with a loud scream. Janan quickly took the Tarkhan's sword and put it through another soldier who came to him. The scream of the soldier was so loud that Janan felt his ear exploding. He pulled out the sword from the Tarkhan's back who fell to the ground, but since Janan was injured he lost his balance and fell too. Umer and two of his mates went for the Tarkhan chief who was guarded by a circle of men around him. Umer pierced a spear in the back of one of the rider's horse with the desired effect, the horse knelt and lifted its front feet, trying to balance but this spur of a moment was enough for an ardent group to break the circle. Umer's axe separated the arm of the chief from the shoulder and as soon as the chief fell, the Tarkhans started to retreat. Most of them sped away on horsebacks, though the Sindhis followed them as much as they possibly could.

- The screams, sound of horses and the mayhem were heard by the women who ran bare feet to the scene. Their hearts broke on what they saw. Each one of them started searching for her man or son in the injured and dead. Three elders and two young Sindhis had lost their lives, 6-7 were injured. Whoever saw Umer, thought he was severely injured but he only had one big gash near his shoulder. His clothes were soaked with blood, most of which belonged to Tarkhans. Nine Tarkhans lay dead, 6 had near fatal

wounds and 4 were crying in pain from their wounds. One of them had his leg amputated through his thigh; he was the one who spoke Sindhi.

Men quickly brought sheets and charpoys from their homes and took care of the deceased and the wounded. They had a strange spark in their eyes that had brought about a new aspect to their appearance. Their hearts were proud of their bravery. Some were thinking what will happen next now that all this had happened. When Koklitash will get this report he will be red with rage and will certainly take revenge. After securing the wounded men in their homes, the young men gathered again and discussed ways and means to defend their village from an attack at night. There was consensus on creating security check posts around the village. On Umer's suggestion, they dug a ditch on the approach to the village and covered it with shrubs and chaff, so it was hidden from the on-comer.

On Janan's advice, the elders of the village agreed to fight to defend their lands and their honour. Janan had fought against the Tarkhans and was sure that Kokiltash will attack. He sent messages to the neighbouring villages and their old comrades that it was time to test their friendship and called for any help they could offer. Within a few days, the small village was looking like a reasonable cantonment. People were proud and had faith against fear and hopelessness. At night while guarding the posts, they chatted about the

times they had fought battles with Tarkhans. To pass time they sang war songs, shared riddles and puzzles. And at dawn when the call came for the morning prayers, everyone went to the mosque. Hearing stories of how their elders had braved the Tarkhans, younger men felt proud and got a new courage in them. They planned their tactics waiting for the enemy to attack. They contemplated every aspect and pointed to their weaknesses during rehearsals.

Women at home were overjoyed by the new feeling they had when they saw their young and old defending their honour. Attending their daily chores of milking the cows, they sat together to make butter and buttermilk. Instead of knitting and needle work they were used to doing, they praised the bravery of their men. After finishing their work, they managed to oil and sharpen the blades of the weapons. There were praises of the axes, spears and swords and their sheens.

But the enemy was nefarious. Three months went by and it was as if Kokiltash's men had never come. Those Tarkhans who were wounded got better, begged their leave and left. Some Sindhis were of the opinion that they should not be allowed to return but the elders thought that to be against the established Sindhi customs. Not only were they fed and treated, they were happily pardoned to return to their families. They went and reported about the readiness of Sindhis and their plans, everything was told in detail to

Kokiltash. So much time had passed that the villagers thought the Tarkhans might just have acknowledged their mistake or the state might have reprimanded them on their excesses. And so the Tarkhans will never come their way. Their check posts were now getting sloppy and the comrades from the surrounding area were gradually begging their leaves. The village was once again a place of heavenly peace and the people started getting back to their normal life of harmony and attended to their chores.

It was the tenth of Muharram and more than half the village was fasting. They had invited a renowned preacher from Thatta for the occasion. Just before the evening prayers, hordes of people gathered at the mosque. The men who were to be on the guard posts too came to the mosque to listen to the sermon. The last ray of the sun spread gratefulness on the fasting mens' faces and finally the sun set behind the far horizon. Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Ashad...

Almost abruptly Dinoo's call for prayers stopped and the sound of "La Ilaa ha..." was heard but with a different meaning to the gathered crowd. And Dinoo stumbled from the stairs of the mosque and fell to the ground between horrified spectators. An arrow had pierced his throat as he was trying to sound the last few words of the prayer call (azaan). The same moment screams of women and children were piercing

the darkness of the skies. The sound of horses, of swords and spears, along with a cloud of sand and smoke spread around the village like D-Day. The men ran to their posts, some went to their homes; some of the elders knelt there in praying to the Lord to save them. No one knew what was going on. Barefooted and unarmed, everyone took a position, but the Tarkhans were not here to face a small village, they had brought in a whole army for a major war. Coming out of the mosque, people saw Tarkhans were present everywhere like locust, in the village. If they saw one man, ten to twelve spears and swords were on him. Young men could not even get to their posts and kept falling like cards. Only a few men somehow got hold of a sword or two from Tarkhans after a fight and headed towards their positions, but the Tarkhans were in thousands; fighting them was impossible, and when the Tarkhans started putting houses on fire, all the remaining resistance and vigour was lost. Everyone ran to his house to secure his family. One Tarkhan went to ride through the village shouting, "Sindhia, if you want to save your women and children, you must surrender now.....!"

When the chaos ended, twenty young men and all the elders of the village stood before Ameer Kokiltash with their bowed heads. 70 to 80 men had been killed in the fight. Kokiltash had a strange smile on his face, he signalled to one of his soldiers, who demanded, "Who is the leader of your village?"

Villagers' eyes darted around them to find Janan but he was not there. Mumbling to each other, they presented the elderly Haji Khaliq Dino as their leader.

"So you are the chief of the village!" the soldier remarked sarcastically.

"Well, what they have decided is okay with me..." The Tarkhan spoke to Kokiltash in Persian, and after a while he faced the villagers again and said, "His Excellency is extremely annoyed because of your insurgency, but keeping His Highness Mirza Baqi's benevolence in mind and from the fear of God, it has been decided that all of you should leave these lands and the village or else stay here like farmers on His Highness's land and send half the produce annually to him in Thatta!"

There was an uneasy quiet in the crowd. Some young men were ready to leave the village but the elders did not take that option, they did not want to abandon their ancestral heritage behind. In the end, they conceded to give half of the produce. Haji Khaliq Dino announced: "Though it is unjust, but we shall deliver half of the produce."

The sentry spoke to Kokiltash again and said, "His Highness is pleased with your reply. But as a penalty for the insurgency, you must provide five virgins for his harem."

He had not even completed his sentence when Umer leapt at him with a speed that took everyone

with surprise. The scream of the Tarkhan brought everyone to the scene, the Tarkhan's own sword had gone through his stomach and he fell on the ground like a butchered ox. When Umer pulled the sword out from the soldier, ten spears were pointed at his chest. Looking around him Umer threw the sword.

There was silence for a few moments, Kokiltash's face was ashen and he started abusing them in Persian. On his orders, Umer was arrested and one of the soldiers said, "His Highness showed grace by allowing you to stay in the village and this is how you repay him; because of this rascal, our master has lost any mercy for you. He will decide what shall be the fate of this man. For you, it is decreed that you must bring all the wheat and grains that you have in the village, His Highness has been kind to appoint me the administrator of this village and I shall camp here with 100 soldiers as a cantonment to teach you Sindhis obedience and allegiance. Remember! My name is Shahbaz Khan, who even the devil fears! Now go and bring everything from your houses, load them in wagons so His Highness can depart with it. And bring any weapons that you have and submit them in the cantonment. Behold, if any one of you defies my orders, be sure that I will ensure that every man, woman and child will be auctioned in the markets of Thatta. Now go, you dogs, you are still here!"

With that the Tarkhan soldiers signalled with their swords and directed them to go to their houses.

ECHO IS THE CALL

With bowed heads everyone made their way. Some of Umer's friends stood there for a while but the pointed swords and spears made them leave their friend Umer.

Many of the houses had been burnt. It took them the whole night to collect their dead and wounded from the alleys of the village. Janan was so injured that some thought he had passed away. The entire night children and women cried and wailed. They had not seen such a night even in the revolt in the times of Shah Baig. At dawn, when they came for their prayers, the scene at the well outside the mosque was grotesque and it fuelled fire in their hearts. The young Umer was hanging upside down in the well, when he was pulled up, he still had some life in him. He had burn marks all over his torso, and at places the flesh had burnt to a blackish mass and dark blood trickled from it. Two balls of raw meat protruded from the socket where once his eyes were. They put him on a platform of the mosque and someone was asked to fetch the medicine man, at which Umer shook his tremulous hand. And while they watched, his last breath took the form of a slogan, "'Jiye Sindh" and he fell still.

When Janan saw his young and only son in this condition, for some unknown reason he did not flinch. Despite his own condition, he got up and kissed his son on his forehead. And he muttered, "Son, may Sindh take you in her arms, God be with you."

The cool breeze brushed playfully against the buildings and plains of Thatta at dawn. The leaves on the trees shone with drops of dew and these drops were akin to the teardrops of heavens above over the sorrows of Sindh. The old lady Bibi Khanum mumbled something while going in to the sleeping quarters of Ameer Khan. The presence of clotted blood and pieces of broken glass on the carpets reminded her of the events of the last night. When the guards had lifted the body of Suleman, the eunuch, it looked like he had been dead for days. A putrid smell had spread over the entire neighbourhood. His eyes had popped out as if surprised and in disbelief over its owner's death, froth had clogged the sides of his mouth. Ameer Khan had kept staring at him for a long while. Ameer Khan looked pale, almost icteric. His eyelids that were used to being heavy after drinking seemed heavier. Bibi Khanum felt sorry for him; she had never seen him so frightened. When she had touched him, he trembled like fallen autumn leaves and Bibi Khanum had noticed that tears had welled up his eyes. Her heart went out for him and she said a silent prayer for his long life. Inside her, she felt a motherly love for him that had brought her to his room. She sat him on the

bed and went to get Laila from her room. Laila was half sprawled on her bed. Her long hair hung from the side of the bed, her half exposed breasts shivered in the cold while she stared at the ceiling. One of her hands lay flaccid on the silk bed and the other was on her stomach. Bibi Khanum tip-toed to her bed and caressed her hair with her fingers.

"Lass, he is very sad, go and cheer him up". In her shaky old voice she said to Laila.

"I will not! He is a coward. He has dishonored me in front of a Sindhi by calling me in that room, I shall not....." She sobbed with tearful eyes.

Bibi Khanum was confused; she knew how stubborn Laila could be. If she was forced, Laila would stab herself. But Ameer Khan was sad, he was heartbroken. And only Laila knew how to appease him. The woman considered Laila's behavior and inquired, "I see a spark in your eyes today, this restlessness of your heart makes me wonder! Have you, my girl, given your heart away to that Sindhi?"

Laila was stung by that remark; the pain that she had been experiencing became sharper as she tried to get to the cause of her emotions. She was so restless that she stood up. She looked at Bibi Khanum with empty eyes, but she could feel the wide plains of Turkistan, its great trees, wild and untrained horses, and its men with broad shoulders, strong muscular

arms and their blue eyes... and she could now clearly see Sodhal. Tears filled her eyes and a smile came to her lips. Her eyes were empty no more and placing her hand on Bibi's shoulder, she declared, "Yes Bibi Khanum! I want to disappear in that Sindhi's blue eyes, I wish to be in the embrace of those strong arms with my head hidden in that wide chest. Bibi Khanum! Dear lady, bring me that Sindhi or take me to him."

"Lower you voice, girl! Ameer Khan hears that and both of us will be ground in the mill!" The elderly woman shook with fear, she was well aware of the temper of the Tarkhan. She had raised these children of Hulagu and Genghis, so she knew!

"Hmph..! That coward! What will he do if he hears this?" Laila said with contempt and then with a strange move, she cupped her breasts and said, "From today, my arms and these..... will experience a new wait, a new longing..... Ameer Khan will not be able to even touch them..."

Just as she finished her sentence, they saw Ameer Khan standing at the door. Bibi Khanum trembled like dry leaves do, and she saw Laila to be in great danger. Ameer Khan looked at Bibi Khanum and his eyes conveyed a signal for her to leave. She left.

Later when she was returning to their room, she felt herself giggling. She had to seen Laila sleep with her head on Ameer Khan's chest before and she used to

love that sight. For a long while she would enjoy seeing two young bodies lying in each others arms, and then she always covered them with a sheet, without waking them up. Longing for the usual scene, smilingly she entered his bedroom but the vacant bed reminded her of the last night. She went to Laila's room to find her sleeping alone. She missed a beat of her heart. Perhaps there was another uprising by the Sindhis and somewhere in the middle of the night Mirza Baqi might have sent for him. Without bothering to ask for the guards she walked towards the stable. Ameer Khan's mustang was kept in a special stable separate from the other horses. She reached there and opened the partition. Ameer Khan lay there on the ground on a heap of dung all around and one of his cheeks was smeared by fresh dung. Bibi Khanum went and shook Idraaki, who woke up looking dazed. Bibi Khaunum's stare brought him to his senses, and he told her how Ameer Khan had come to his room late last night and then they had been in the living room. Ameer Khan drank a lot and heard him sing. He then came to the stable and embracing the horse, kept talking to the animal and then he fell asleep.

Bibi sent Idraaki to fetch a clean sheet. She wet her own scarf and started wiping Ameer Khan's face and hair. The cool caress made Ameer Khan turn to the other side but did not wake him. At this Bibi Khanum shook him violently which finally worked and Ameer Khan slowly woke up from his slumber. He looked

around and finding himself sleeping on a heap of dung, he asked, "who brought me here?"

Bibi Khanum remained silent and covered his shoulders with a clean sheet. Slowly and gradually he remembered the events of the last night ... and rage caused him to clench his fists. He covered himself with the sheet and walked to the living quarters. A glance at the pool of blood at the carpet reminded him of Suleman. He knelt and took a pinch from the clotted blood, rubbed it first in his palms and then on his face. He mumbled, "Suleman, I will avenge my father and you, I swear to God I will take revenge!" He clapped for attention of his guards and told them to get his horse saddled and went to take a bath.

On his way to Mirza Baqi, he pondered over the events of the last night. Sodhal's memory brought his blood to boil again. He thought of Laila who had said, "I will sleep with you only when you arrest that Sindhi and bring him to me." And after these words, she had pointed her dagger at him and with contempt and had slammed the door shut.

Mirza Baqi was expecting him and said, "Despite the presence of such brave commanders like you, the Tarkhans and Arghuns have been facing one humiliation after the other. Tarkhan nobles are not getting their share of grains; leaders like Kokiltash are insulted at their own premises. We are being openly bad-mouthed in Thatta. Akhund Saleh has the courage

to defy orders to teach Persian in his seminaries and sends reprimands in return of our decrees."

Ameer Khan stood up with his head down. He looked at Kokiltash Arghun, Khusro Khan, Burq Andaaz Khan and Mirza Baqi Baig, they were all quiet and seemed terrified. Mirza Baqi held his beard in his fist and explained, " I have to look after the entire country, for how long will we have to face these small but disturbing insurgencies. As the matters stand today, Sindhis will soon beat us back to Kandhar. The Sultan is mad with rage on not getting his share and has sent a messenger that His Excellency is lodged at Lahore and that we should all pay him a visit. He does not know that Arghun and Tarkhan blood has just turned into water and they now remain silent on being abused and ridiculed, and that I have to intervene in every small affair. I had to provide my men to Ameer Kokiltash for getting him his estate. The Syeds of Thatta have now become so arrogant that they have put an embargo on Tarkhans to traverse through their neighbourhood as they feel they enter peoples' houses in a state of intoxication. So much so that the non-muslims have become as courageous as to have their disputes resolved by Akhund Saleh rather than our Qazi courts. Ameer Khan, I declare you the mayor of Thatta, I want to see how you, of all, face the rebels."

Kokiltash Arghun wanted to say something but looking at the angry Mirza Baqi chose to remain quiet.

He knew defying Mirza Baqi would mean getting his entire family killed.

“And Ameer Khan, I grant you the status of Panj Hazaari (a-commander of 5000), I hope you will not let me down.”

Every one present chanted his congratulations; Ameer Khan bowed his head and said, “Each of your orders shall be implemented!”

The deputy of the cantonment entered the hall and said, “May your Highness prevail! Sire, the wheat stores are almost empty, most of the wheat left is heavily infested and not edible. The sergeants and soldiers have started refusing the bread loaves. If Your Highness permits, this wheat may be destroyed.”

“Hmph... Hmph..., bread loaves from that wheat should be served for lunch today, and the officers of the cantonment shall dine with us, have some loaves made of mud too!”

The deputy in charge showed his assent and left. A moment later the sergeant declared, “Two Sindhis who made trouble in a Tarkhan neighbourhood are here, sir.”

“Bring them in!” A strange spark came to the eyes of Mirza Baqi Baig. Two middle aged Sindhi men were brought, tied in ropes. On seeing them Mirza Baqi came down from the throne and shouting like an

imbecile started slapping, punching and kicking the men. When he got exhausted, he faced the sergeant and said, "Someone ask them if they plead guilty or not, and whether they are ready to announce their allegiance to the crown."

One of the Tarkhan nobles came forward and said in Sindhis, "Admit to your crime if you want to live."

The Sindhis remained quiet and half smiled. One of them said slightly loudly. "If passing through a Tarkhan neighborhood is a crime, we admit it!"

"But you misbehaved with a girl from the Tarkhan noble family..." He fumed.

"It was she who called us, and showing her breasts asked us to touch and tell whether this Kandhari fruit was ripe or not..... We only obeyed her, she was a Tarkhan, and how could we disobey the order of a Tarkhan noble!" He said that trying to stifle a laugh.

Controlling his anger, the Tarkhan turned to Mirza Baqi and said, "Sire, they have admitted their crime!"

"Ah! Tell them that they shall never ever visit a Tarkhan area and accede to our allegiance."

The Tarkhan faced the Sindhis and said, "repeat

after me, may God save His Highness, we are your servants; and you will be pardoned or else..."

"Hundreds of curses be upon the foreign rule, and Mirza Baqi is a dog." They said the last part in Persian.

It was like they were all stung by a swarm of bees. Mirza Baqi stood up and while spit drooled from the sides of his mouth, he said, "they must be skinned alive....., in front of me....., right now.....Sergeant.'

Four sentries came to the Sindhis with their swords, while the other Tarkhans came closer to enjoy the moment and encircled them. One of the sentries split the skin of the scalp with the tip of his sword; warm blood spurted from the forehead of the first Sindhi and blotted the white robe of the sentry. One sentry kept slicing the skin and the other kept peeling it from its bed. When the raw flesh of the cheeks was exposed, one of the Tarkhans could not hold his nausea and puked on the floor. Mirza Baqi cast such an eye on him as if he was about to order him skinned. The Tarkhan noble was terrified and wiped his face and retracted from the circle of men but continued retching.

When the skin of the face was completely off, the air was filled with the smell of raw meat. The other Sindhi could not hold that and tried to break away and started screaming, "You people are not humans but vultures! Rascals, man eaters, shit eaters!" A sentry put

his dagger on his neck and nicked it downwards. Blood spurted once again splashing on his clothes. At that moment, recovering all his strength, the Sindhi collected his spit and spat it forcefully on Mirza Baqi. The ball of phlegm shot and lodged itself on Mirza Baqi's beard. The sentry beheaded the Sindhi with a single blow of his sword.

Mirza Baqi's eyes were blood shot and he angrily took the turban of a Tarkhan and started wiping his beard. Bewildered, all the Tarkhan nobles wanted to get out of there. At that another sergeant announced, "Sire, lunch is served, kindly come to grace the occasion..."

All of them entered the dining hall. The tables were decorated with many different kinds of food. On one side, wines were presented in red, pink and maroon coloured jars. Handsome and young Turk boys assisted the men to wash their hands. The Tarkhan nobles teased the boys and pinched them jovially and praising Mirza Baqi approached the wines. Turkish boys presented them their glasses in feminine and artistic style. When they had had their drinks, they started to dine. Mirza Baqi raised his hand and stopped everyone; he faced the chief warden of the cantonment and said, "You first!"

There were three kinds of bread loaves, white ones made of fine flour, blackish ones from the worm

infested wheat and grey black loaves made from mud. The warden reached out and picked up the white bread when Mirza Baqi tapped his arm and said, "not this, take that one!" He pointed to the bread made of mud.

The officers of the cantonment were appalled; they looked at Mirza Baqi and begged for mercy. Mirza was unmoved and had a mischievous flare in his eyes. Helplessly, the warden took a morsel from a loaf and started chewing it. The mud became thick and sticky in his mouth and he started retching. Blackish froth drooled from the sides of his mouth and spilled on his attire. His eyes watered. He swallowed hard to gulp the mud down. All the nobles were scared. Embarrassed, Ameer Khan shifted his glance from the poor warden and the mighty Mirza. When the warden had gulped the morsel, Mirza Baqi offered him the better bread from the worm infested wheat. He started chewing on it to down it and get rid of the taste of mud he had swallowed. Mirza Baqi observed him keenly and then smiled, "which bread did you like better, one with mud or this one?"

The warden bowed his head, every head was down, and then Mirza roared again, 'you did not have even mud to eat in Kandhar and here you object to eat bread because some worms were seen in the wheat. Be careful! I must not hear any further complaints."

The warden replied, "Yes, Your Highness, yes," and slipped out of sight. The remaining men joined Mirza Baqi in their onslaught on grilled meats, buttered bread, biryani and the pickles of Thatta; as if they had never had a decent meal or as if they were having their last ever meal. Ameer Khan hated these hungry craving Tarkhans. He wondered if the Sindhis were to be brought to order, he will have to bring some discipline to his own ranks.

After the meal, Mirza Baqi faced Ameer Khan and said, "We have asked for two hundred preachers and teachers from Kandhar, it should be ensured that they teach Persian to the students of seminaries especially in Akhund Saleh's seminary. Until the Sindhis read Roomi, Hafiz and Khayyam, they will not stop these insurgencies. Once indulged in the delicacies of life, of Turkish boys, of wines and spirits, they will forget about any rebellions. It is therefore necessary that they abandon their unworthy language and start liking Persian."

"Absolutely, sir you say the gospel truth!" Ameer Khan nodded.

When Mirza Baqi went back to the palace, Ameer Khan asked all the Tarkhan officers and chiefs to gather after the siesta, in a Tarkhani bar where they could discuss some administrative issues regarding Thatta. After a heavy meal, most of the men had felt

like yawning but doing that in Mirza Baqi's presence was asking for trouble. Now that he was gone, they yawned at will and stretched their backs. On observing such a conduct, Ameer khan mumbled to himself and went back to his mansion.

6

The Tarkhani bar had a separate table and stage for each of the Tarkhan and Arghun nobles and chiefs. The owner of the place, Atish Khan knew each of them personally. He knew them inside out. He was even aware of which Tarkhan will have the company of a particular suitor; his spy network was so meticulous he knew fine details about the sexual affairs of the nobles as well as their wives and slaves, of where they met and what ensued thereafter. After every such news he used to brace his deformed leg and laughed. The nobles and the chiefs were weary of him, they knew he was aware of their secrets and feared him for leaking about them to Mirza Baqi or the other leaders. But most of all, he was known for his extremely beautiful boys to serve drinks. Every month scores of blue eyed boys between the ages of 12 to 16 years were brought from Iran, Turkistan, Afghanistan and Kandhar for sale as slaves and Atish Khan was always the first one to cast an eye on them. Before buying them, he used to examine the boys in minute details as if he was there to buy an animal; the teeth, waist, eyes, pink cheeks, moles on face and most of all their buttocks. The Tarkhan nobles desperately waited for the day when new boys were displayed and employed to serve wines

and other beverages. And at times there were fights among the chiefs over these boys. It was usual that lives were taken on these matters in this place. And whenever Tarkhans fought over some boy, Atish Khan took both the warring Tarkhans to the backyard and presented them each with a dagger and returned to the bar. The one who survived would be served in style by that particular Saaqi (cup-bearer) with wines. The defeated Tarkhan, usually dead or fatally wounded was dragged by his feet by two of his guards who sent them to their addresses. These saaqi boys spent the days serving wines and other beverages in the bar and their nights were spent in the bedrooms of some special nobles.

This evening though, Atish Khan was staring at the chandelier hanging from the ceiling, engrossed in deep thought. His spies had already told him that Ameer Khan was the new mayor. Ameer Khan was quite happy with Atish Khan but ever since he had bought Laila from him, Ameer Khan had been especially kind towards him. And now with his position, he could be very useful to Atish Khan, but something was in his way. And that was Mirza Baqi's liking for Idraaki, the Turk boy that Ameer Khan owned. Atish Khan had been summoned by Mirza Baqi and ordered to present Idraaki to him. Ameer Khan would never agree to sell Idraaki; at least this Atish Khan was sure of. And he was different from the other Tarkhan chiefs. If he wanted to favour someone, he

would go out of the way to do whatever it takes but if he got enraged, there could be no worse a foe than him. Mirza Baqi was not an easy man either; by appointing Ameer Khan he had killed two birds with one shot, on the one hand no one was better suited to face the rebellions of Sindhis, and on the other, Ameer Khan would become so busy with the administrative issues that presenting Idraaki to Mirza Baqi would not be too difficult a task for Atish Khan. But the problem was if he took Idraaki from Ameer Khan and presented him to Mirza Baqi, he might like him too much to return him back. Such a scenario would not require too much of wisdom for Ameer Khan and he would instantly know that Atish Khan must be behind it. Ameer Khan had sent him a message that they would be at his public house that evening to discuss some administrative affairs with other Tarkhan chiefs. Bibi Khanum had also been to him with news of Ameer Khan's volatile mood; his loyal eunuch Suleman had been killed by a Sindhi in front of his own eyes; Laila had kicked him out of her room, so touching upon Idraaki meant trouble at such a time. He was still thinking when the Tarkhan nobles started arriving at the house.

With the arrival of more chiefs and lords, the atmosphere of the public house had become quite confused. The boys took the glasses of wine and presented them to the nobles in their own peculiar style and seductive manner. The nobles too were busy

chatting with them and trying to get close to them in order to pinch and kiss them. When Ameer Khan entered the place, most of the Tarkhans gave him a standing reception, although some heavy-headed Arghun chiefs did not bother even looking at him and kept busy with the boys and their drinks. Atish Khan went to him, bowed and took him to his new sitting place. This place was ordinarily occupied by Kokiltash Arghun and his brother Khusro Khan usually sat beside his brother. He noticed Ameer Khan's movement to that table with a frown. Not bothered with his looks, Ameer Khan took his new seat. A slender Turk boy came towards him to welcome him with an oblique smile and said in Persian, "Welcome master of my heart!"

Ameer Khan smiled too and gently pinched his cheek and said, "Your cheeks are pinker than pomegranates, boy! You look new!"

"Idraaki's cheeks are pinker than him Ameer Khan," Khusro Khan said tauntingly. All the nobles joined Khusro Khan in his laugh. Ameer Khan was upset and shouted, "Khusro Khan, you must rinse your mouth with perfume and fragrances before pronouncing Idraaki's name. Your mouth is full of filth."

The nobles laughed again. Khusro Khan was red with rage and putting his hand on his dagger's sheath he spurted, "Ameer Khan, hold your tongue. You may be the mayor of Thatta but that does not bother me."

On the table in front of Ameer Khan, a beautiful glass of wine had just been placed, he lifted that up and instantly splashed the drink on Khusro Khan's face; his clothes and face were coloured with the drink. Abruptly Khusro Khan stood up and the next moment he approached Ameer Khan with his dagger drawn. All the nobles stood up surprised. Atish Khan limped his way towards them and begged them to settle down but Khusro Khan waved him away and said, "He has insulted me, I swear by my father that Idraaki will be in my lap tonight."

Ameer Khan rose but instead of the dagger his hand was on the stick he had with a hooked handle. He held the stick by the end and put the hooked handle in Khusro Khan's neck and pulled him violently causing him to fall in his feet near Ameer Khan's table. Ameer Khan pressed his foot on his neck and roared, "It is because of inept Arghun nobles that the Sindhis have reached this state, you have no honour left in you. But remember, I will fix you all before the Sindhis." Khusro Khan attempted to rise but Ameer Khan kicked him and he remained on the ground.

Atish Khan besought Ameer Khan for pardon and after a lot of persuasion, he released him from under him and called two Tarkhan sentries. He ordered, "Take this rascal and throw him at some heap of rubbish, and Atish Khan! If I spot him in this public house ever again, I will have you deported nude from

Thatta all the way to Kandhar."

Khusro Khan's anger had now turned into embarrassment and shame and when the two sentries picked him, his head was down, his face was smudged with mud and his expensive clothes were spoilt from wine and dirt. Putting his dagger in its sheath, he said, "Ameer Khan, one day, sooner or later, you will definitely be punished for your behavior with Arghuns..."

Saying this, he got his hand released from the sentry and went to the door, where they saw a giant of a man standing there and his size had left no room for anyone to enter or leave the house. His wide chest and heavy moustache were almost scary. A long bladed axe was hanging from his waistband but his hands only held a piece of rope. All the nobles were witnessing the departure of Khusro Khan but looking at the scene they stared at each other in surprise.

Atish Khan was dumbfounded; it was for the first time ever that a Sindhi had dared to enter his public house. He started limping towards the door and shouted, "Hey! Who the hell are you?"

"The angel of death for Tarkhans," the man replied with a laugh.

Reminded of his tribal Afghan Tarkhan ways, Khusro Khan drew his dagger and abusing him said:

“you Sindhis have started having the courage to.....”and attacked him. The man did not move even an inch, he just held Khusro Khan’s hand with the dagger and with the other hand struck the rope on Atish Khan’s face. Atish Khan was blinded by the force the rope lashed his face. He could not hold his temper and attacked in retaliation but the man twisted the arm of Khusro Khan and put him between them. Atish Khan’s knife did not miss and landed near Khusro Khan’s heart; his face was showing signs more of surprise than of pain before he sighed and knelt down. The man pushed him away like a log and his head came and hit Atish Khan in his chest, who lost balance and lay sprawled on the floor. All this happened so randomly and quickly that the Tarkhans were shocked.

“Get out of here, all of you, you mother.....” the man shouted. He bent forward and picked up a large table and threw it at the crowd. The Tarkhans ran and the table landed with a huge noise. There was panic all around. Ameer Khan kept silent and watched all what was happening around him. He did not even move from where he stood. He had recognized Sanghaar and at that moment two thoughts came to his mind, one of fright and the other of revenge. The wine had had a calming down effect on his turmoil and fear reigned over feelings of revenge. Confronting this man meant certain death. It was impossible to kill this man without some kind of trickery.

“Get out I said.....you sons of sheep. Get lost...” Sanghaar roared again and picked up another table. The Tarkhans took cover and AmeerKhan stood up, he spoke to them in Persian asking them to leave. Tarkhans were waiting for such an opportunity and quickly sped out of the room.

Bringing a wry smile on his face, Ameer Khan said, “Sanghaar Khan, come, have a drink with me....!”

Sanghaar approached him silently, when he was close enough he threw the rope with a noose at one end towards Ameer Khan. The noose tightened around Ameer Khan’s neck when Sanghaar pulled it towards him. Ameer Khan fell on his face and started crawling on all fours. The feeling of revenge came over him, but he kept tolerating the mistreatment on purpose, he wanted to be in such a state when nothing could bring fear in his heart.... “He is the murderer of my father, he hanged him upside down, and in return we had chopped Sindhis to pieces that we had fed to dogs, but Sanghaar had escaped. Oh God! Give me the strength so I tolerate these insults to a time when the fire of revenge in me is so strong that I burn to ashes everything that belongs to Sindhis even their children.....”

In a stifled voice he said, “Sanghaar, I invited you to have a drink and.....you....’

Sanghaar snubbed him, “If I had to drink, I can

at will..... I shall see who can dare stop me but presently I am here for something special."

Ameer Khan did not reply. Pulling the rope he made Ameer Khan stand up, each one of his moves was causing Ameer Khan's eyes to pop out.

"Why has Mirza Baqi sent for more troops from Kandhar?" Sanghaar asked staring at him.

"I do not know," he said through a choking voice.

"Ah! You do not know!" He gave a little tug to the noose around his neck and said, "You will not talk.....Ameer Khan, you know me well. I never think twice before killing a Tarkhan," Sanghaar's voice had so much truth and emphasis that despite his desire, fear started engulfing his mind. But this secret was like life and death of Tarkhans, he was prepared to sacrifice himself for that. He mumbled, "I do not know anything, but even if I did, how can you expect me to tell you a state secret?"

"Okay.....dont." Sanghaar gave it a thought, this secret was very important for Ameer Khan but he had to know. He and Janan had promised Akhund Noor Muhammad that they will come with the secret news; in addition they would also get the letter sent to Kandhar by them. He looked around; suddenly he saw one of the Turk boys who was hiding under a table, trembling with fear. He thought of a plan, and called

the boy. The boy complied and came to him with his head bowed and hands folded in a way that made Sanghaar smile. Seeing a smile, the boy was reassured and started making stylish and seductive moves that these boys were known for, and had it been a Tarkhan, he would have been ready to do anything to get the boy but this made an opposite effect on the Sindhi and he started laughing loudly. Taking advantage of Sanghaar's inattention, Ameer Khan jerked the rope out of his hands and leapt towards the door. Sanghaar stopped laughing and he went after Ameer Khan, but right then Janan with his spear pointed at Ameer Khan's back brought him back to Sanghaar.

"Well done brother Janan, I thought the whole plot was destroyed! You better had not left the door or scores of Tarkhan rascals might enter and we might be caught off guard. Please go and take your position."

Sanghaar slapped Ameer Khan with one hand like an eagle attacks its prey. Ameer Khan retracted five or six steps and stumbled, finally landing on a couch. Blood spurted from his nose and lips. Sanghaar ordered the Turk boy in Persian; what he said left both the boy and Ameer Khan stunned. It was as if Ameer Khan had been stung by a viper. On hearing the command, the boy stared at Sanghaar in absolute surprise and fear. Sanghaar took out his dagger from his waist and put it on the boy's throat and said, "Lad, if you do not do as told, this blade will split your

neck!" Saying this he returned to Ameer Khan, and twisting his arms at his back and pushing him forwards, he signalled to the boy. The terrified lad advanced and taking his small knife approached Ameer Khan's pajamas.

Ameer Khan rolled back like a lizard as the boy put his hands on his pajamas. Ameer Khan pleaded, "Sanghaar Khan, for God's sake, I would rather want you kill me...."

Snaghar signalled the boy who got ready to undo the band that held the pajamas, Ameer Khan screamed, "Okay, okay, stop.... I am ready to tell.....!" Sweat poured from his scalp and flooded his eyes, giving his face an absolutely ashen look.

"Mirza Baqi has come to know about the conspiracy of Mirza Jan Baba and Shah Qasim Arghun. In addition to that King Akbar is also planning to invade Sindh, and therefore Mirza has asked for supplies and troops from Kandhar..!"

"Who has gone for getting the supplies?" Sanghaar asked.

"Ameer Kokiltash Arghun...."

"When did Kokiltash leave?"

"This morning....!" Ameer Khan could hardly breathe.

"Oh!....."Sanghaa signalled to the boy who retracted.

Sanghaa forced Ameer Khan ahead of him and started towards the door. Janan heard the footsteps and came in to look and signalled to Sanghaa. Sanghaa put his dagger on Ameer Khan's back and they came out. Out there, about 20 or so Tarkhan soldiers armed with spears and swords were waiting for them. Sanghaa pushed Ameer Khan forward and said, "If any of you makes one move, I will put this dagger through him....."

The soldiers gave him angry looks.....Ameer Khan who had no turban on him and was bleeding from his nose and mouth, kept walking as told while Sanghaa and Janan came to their horses. Sanghaa left Ameer Khan's arm and held the end of the rope, and mounted his horse. When Janan had also mounted his horse, Sanghaa said, "Ameer Khan, you are the new mayor of Thatta , whenever you engage in atrocities on Sindhis, just remember the fate of your father...., cruelty will not be forgiven..."

He flicked the reins and released the noose around Ameer Khan's neck. Within seconds the horses disappeared leaving behind them a cloud of sand. Ameer Khan looked at the Tarkhans standing before him with hatred, mumbled something and went inside the public house.

The news of Ameer Khan's nomination as a mayor of Thatta frightened the people in the city. They knew for sure that the city will face atrocities that would have no parallel in the history. In the afternoon, two skinned bodies of Sindhis were hung from a branch of a banyan tree that stood in the main square in front of the Jamia Mosque. Whoever saw them retched with disgust on the cruelty of the administration. They cursed the Tarkhans and whispered abuse. For Sindhis, this was the first gift of Ameer Khan's mayorship. Later when people were going for evening prayers, they saw Ameer Khan with about 50 soldiers going towards the seminary of Akhund Saleh. There was uproar among the people. If they touched the madrassa of Akhund Saleh, this would result in revolt in the city, students from all the seminaries will get on the Tarkhans. What will happen then was something no one even wanted to imagine. Older men went to the mosques earlier than usual and offered special prayers, "Allah Almighty, please keep the people of Thatta and entire Sindh safe from the wrath of these cruel men. Please do not let these men butcher innocent souls who have not forgotten their atrocities of the past!" Hindus prayed in front of their

goddesses for ridding Thatta of these demons.

Ameer Khan and his men dismounted in front of the seminary of Akhund Saleh. He was accompanied by 4 to 5 Kandhari preachers who Mirza Baqi had summoned from Kandhar to teach the Sindhis about correct Islam and Persian language. An elderly man sat on a small charpoy in front of the door. He had the pipe of a hookah in his mouth and was looking at the skies apparently engrossed in deep thought. He did not look towards the sound coming from the trotting horses. He kept puffing at the pipe even when Ameer Khan had stopped his horse besides him. Ameer Khan took his spear and poked it in his back, the old man rose looking surprised at seeing the Tarkhans.

“You shameless donkey, how dare you keep puffing at your pipe when you know we have arrived?” Ameer Khan roared.

The old chap smiled, pointed to his ears and said, “Speak up, I am a little deaf. Who are you?”

The Tarkhans started laughing, their laughter enraged Ameer Khan and he shouted, “Silence, It’s me Ameer Khan, the new mayor of Thatta.”

“Okay! May be you are, but what do you want from here?” he replied care-freely.

Ameer Khan got so angry that he pushed the old man with his spear so hard that the poor souls

stumbled and fell behind the charpoy. But he got his balance and straightening up he said, "Son, you were about to kill a man! Is that how one behaves with old people, is that what your father has taught you?" The old chap steamed.

Ameer Khan was about to kill him when a Kandhari preacher said to him in Persian, "If you are so strict from the beginning, how do you expect the students and teachers to cooperate? Be diplomatic; do not spoil the whole plan."

The old man sat down on his charpoy and as if nothing had happened started puffing on his pipe again. Ameer Khan muttered to himself and decided not to punish the old man and politely said, "Old man! Open the door, we want to meet Akhund Saleh; these preachers have travelled all the way from Kandhar to meet him."

"What? What did you say? Please speak up, I couldn't hear that." Once again the old man pointed towards his ears.

Controlling his anger Ameer Khan repeated himself but louder this time.

"Oh! You should have said so." He rose and shook hands with the preachers and welcomed them. Ameer Khan smiled and said, "Old man! They have come from Kandhar only yesterday, so how will they understand your Sindhi!"

"Lad! Come from Kandhar they have, I welcome them," and then whispered, *"every now and then, my Sindhri*

You have Kandharis troubling you!"

Ameer Khan shouted, "What did you say?"

"Lad, I said that they are great preachers of Islam, it is so fortunate for Sindh that they have come all the way from Kandhar!"

"Okay, now open the door." Ameer Khan declared with obvious annoyance.

"This seminary is a place of knowledge, it is forbidden to enter the premises with weapons, and what have these soldiers got to do with knowledge? This door will open surely for the knowledgeable preachers but for soldiers, it never will." The old man got his strength from somewhere and said this boldly with a spark in his eyes.

Ameer Khan consulted the preachers who nodded their approval by movement of their beards and in the end all agreed to that. Ameer Khan said loudly, "You open the door, only the preachers and I will meet the revered Akhund Saleh. Sentries! All of you retreat back at least forty yards and wait for us."

The soldiers moved back with their horses at once. Ameer Khan advanced to the door but that did

not have any effect on the old man. He said, "Shh shh Shh, lay down your weapons, only then will the door open."

Ameer Khan felt helpless and took the sword from its sheath and kept it on the old man's charpoy and left his spear on the ground. The old man advanced and pulled out the knife from Ameer Khan's waistband. And then respectfully he approached the preachers and took their knives too. The preachers were surprised at the attentiveness and swift movements of the elderly man. After seizing their weapons, the old man went to the door and knocked. There was a slight sound from inside on which he said, "Some pious preachers of religion have come from Kandhar. Open the door to welcome them."

A small entrance door opened up in the large gate. The door was such that only one person could enter at a time and had to bow his head to do so. The old man said, "This is a door to wisdom, only the fortunate get a chance to bow here!"

Ameer Khan followed the preachers to enter inside the seminary. A short guy took them towards the room of Akhund Saleh. Once there, he asked all of them to take their shoes off. When they entered the room they saw a middle aged man sitting on a mat, with some gray showing in an otherwise pitch black beard. He had an intense look and spark on his face, and was busy reading a book. When he saw them, he

stood to welcome them and asked them to sit. Ameer Khan found sitting on a mat very uncomfortable and kept shifting his weight from one side to the other.

One of the preachers from Kandhar narrated the reason for their visit and said, "His Highness Mirza Baqi Baig feels that in order to improve the education in Sindh, all the seminaries and schools should start teaching religion and Persian language. For this purpose* the preachers have been brought from Kandhar who have vast experience of teaching methods. Five of us have been ordered to teach in this seminary.'

Akhund Saleh deliberated on the proposal for a while and then thoughtfully said, "Most of the schools and seminaries are imparting religious knowledge and some students are already studying Persian."

"The government wants to broaden the teaching of Persian and every student must read Persian so that he can expand his knowledge of the world," one of the clerics said.

"Persian is not the language of these people. And so only those students will study it who have an interest in learning the language. In addition, why should Persian be taught on a governmental level, when we already have teachers who can teach Persian." Akhund Saleh was very composed and was talking very politely.

One of the clerics was getting irritated; "Persian is the language of the rulers, a language of Islamic state and is an Islamic language. It is the only civilized language of the Muslims of Iran, Afghanistan and India. It reigns from Kandhar to Delhi. Learning Persian will bring the Sindhis closer to their masters and they will start having a special understanding of Islam. The differences between the Tarkhans and Sindhis will also improve."

Akhund Saleh did not reply in haste. He eyed the preachers and staring at Ameer Khan, he said, "If a language is thrust upon Sindhis at governmental level, they will never study it. They have an immense amount of love for their language which is one of the oldest languages of the world..... It is thousands of years old, sweet and capacious just like Persian. They have never accepted any foreign language, the Brahmins tried to teach them Sanskrit while preaching their religion but they did not learn it. Arabs brought Islam but they could not impose Arabic on these people. History shows ample evidence that they have not accepted foreign languages. They read Persian poetry and literature with great interest but if Persian is forcibly imposed upon them, that might create a negative feeling for Persian.'

"It is a state order that the Sindhis will have to comply with. It is also necessary that they learn Persian in order to help the government in running state

affairs. Those who have learnt it are now writing poetry in it and the state is providing these poets special stipends and other favours." Ameer Khan said winding up the talk.

"Sindhis do not look up to such men, who have engaged in writing in Persian to please the government. You and I know well how the Iranians, Moghuls and our own rulers have been laughing at their Persian. Therefore if you do not want people to start looking down on Persian, you should better not insist upon this issue!" Akhund Saleh was speaking very humbly but his determination and un-moving personality left the Kandhari preachers in his awe.

"But who can dare turn down state orders? Whoever defies learning Persian, his tongue will be chopped off." Ameer Khan was furious now.

"Well then, the state will have to cut the tongues of all Sindhis, they will prefer to remain speechless than speaking in Persian." Akhund Saleh said in the same polite tone.

"But on your better advice, the students will oblige you," one of the clerics said.

"You have probably forgotten that I am also a Sindhi, moreover I shall never give my students any wrong advice," Akhund replied.

Ameer Khan stood up. For a while he kept

looking at Akhund Saleh and then said slowly, "I am the mayor of Thatta, all the students of Thatta will learn Persian or all the seminaries will be closed!" He said that and came out of the room; the clerics from Kandhar followed him.

Any seminary that Ameer Khan went to, gave almost the same response that aggravated Ameer Khan's rage to new peaks. Early next morning, he rode with about 100 men to Akhund Saleh's seminary. The preachers accompanied him. The old guard did not open the door and against the advice of the preachers, he pierced his dagger in the old man's throat and asked his men to break open the door. The men started their assault and the door cracked after 8 to 10 blows and the smaller door broke open at its hinges. The soldiers drew their swords and entered the seminary. Ameer Khan and his men headed to the reading rooms, they found Akhund Saleh teaching some students in the first room. Upon a signal from Ameer Khan, one of the preachers came and stood besides Akhund.

Akhund Saleh pretended not to see them and said to the students, "perhaps this is my last lecture to you. These Kandhari clerics have come to teach you Persian by force with drawn swords, my last advice to you is...

He could not finish his sentence as Ameer Khan asked two of his men who took him away. The class was for young boys with ages of around 15-16 years.

The preacher glanced at Ameer Khan and getting to the podium, he addressed the students, "tiflan-e-mun (my dear children)"

He could not finish what he had to say as two boys got up and said in unison, "we will not learn Persian."

Ameer Khan signalled again and two men took the boys away slapping and kicking them on their way out. The other kids were frightened, and there was pin drop silence in the class. With frightened looks, the boys looked at the preachers and soldiers. Ameer Khan addressed them in Sindhi, "Any boy who will not learn Persian will be punished, he will be undressed and beaten up with this stick....., tell me will you learn Persian or not?"

The boys were scared so no one spoke, Ameer Khan thought for a moment and leaving a preacher there, left the room. Commanding his men to follow, he headed towards the kiosk near the Jamia Mosque. He asked the soldiers to prepare a hanging pole. People started gathering on seeing that a hanging pole was being erected. Ameer Khan's men stood in a form of a circle around the structure. The news spread like wild fire that Akhund Saleh was to be hanged, and they left whatever they were doing and started running barefooted towards the mosque.

When the hanging pole was ready, Ameer Khan

came and stood in front of Akhund Saleh. He said, "Akhund, hanging you does not please me, there is still time, you have to concede. If you commit in writing for Kandhari preachers to teach Persian in your seminary, I shall let you go, but if not...

Akhund Saleh's face was calm with confidence and pride. He said, "I have seen thousands of illiterates like you. If you hang me, will Sindh start speaking in Persian? You can hang as many teachers as you like but you will never succeed in teaching Persian by force..!"

Ameer Khan waved and one of his men put the noose around Akhund's neck. There was anguish in the crowd which was breaking their hearts, but the swords of soldiers kept them from advancing. On Ameer Khan's signal, a sentry pulled away the board under Akhund's feet. Akhund hung without a sound with that smile still on his face. Ameer Khan was surprised to see him and wondered where the Sindhis had learnt to smile despite being on the gallows!

He now looked towards the boys and shouted, "you scoundrels, will you learn Persian or not?"

The boys remained quiet and wept on seeing their dear teacher's body hanging from the pole. Ameer Khan signalled again, his men bound the two boys on a pole with ropes and chopped both their tongues from their bases. The boys screamed in pain, blood spurting and trickling from the sides of their

mouths. They swallowed some blood causing them to choke and cough. The crowd was stunned and stood still like a log, watching the horror unfold in front of their blank eyes.

Leaving about 10 soldiers on the spot, Ameer Khan left. He announced to the whole city that any Akhund who did not teach Persian in his seminary or school will meet the same fate like Akhund Saleh, and any student who refused to learn Persian will have his tongue chopped off; and any parent who withdraws his kids from the seminaries and schools will have their properties confiscated.

Scores of Sindhis gathered to see Akhund Saleh and the boys in the square. Never had they witnessed anything as brutal as this. Many of them cried, some could not even cry on seeing the fate of their brethren, their hearts were torn apart, their minds completely numb. They entered the mosque and started praying and complaining to the Creator. The injured boys' faces were swollen and finally their necks turned on one side. Their mouths were soon covered by swarms of flies.

8

The moonlit nights of Thatta were always known for the cool breeze that played with the trees and plains. Sodhal felt like he was the only awake soul, when except for the sounds of an occasional Tarkhan guard, the whole valley seemed to be asleep. Sodhal wondered how these people who were hurt in their hearts and souls hid their sorrows in their sleep. Sodhal felt strange, riding alone on the streets of this magnificent city of Thatta. He caressed the withers of his mare which halted in front of the motel. Sodhal knocked on the door but not getting any response, knocked harder. At last a terrified old Aloo opened the door. Arrival of a traveller at this hour always scared him. Tarkhans would usually come at such hours looking for their runaway Turk boys and beat him and the other guests before leaving.

“Who is that?” The old man asked.

“It’s me, Sodhal!” was the brief reply.

“Sodhal! You, at this hour. Come, why are you standing outside? You go on in and I will put your horse in the stable....., shall I leave something for the horse to feed?” The elderly man said, taking the reins from Sodhal.

Sodhal entered the inn and raised the flame of the lantern and held his head in his hands when he sat on the bed spread. He felt an immense pressure of blood in his brain like a violent storm in deep seas. His body burned with the flames of an unseen fire. Every now and then, two lips in the shape of a kiss appeared in his imagination and he started massaging his eyes to get rid of the illusion. Aloo returned and noticed his predicament and said tenderly, "Why Sodhal, something bothering you?"

"Oh it's nothing really, can you please open a room for me," he said trying to avoid the question.

He lay down on the bed of his room, with his shoes still on. Aloo stood in front of him and looked on. He knew Sodhal for years. Who did not know about the valour and achievements of this man against the Tarkhans! Sodhal was the vanguard behind every revolt. After the incident of uncle Varyam, everybody considered him to be of their own kin. The Tarkhans were always apprehensive and afraid of him.

Sodhal always stayed in Aloo's inn whenever he visited Thatta. Aloo always kept a special room for him, even if he had to get the guests to stay in the lounge. He had two to three waiters to help with the customers but for Sodhal, he always prepared and served food by himself. He alone looked after his room and tended his horse. The entire Sindh knew the rebellious man in Sodhal, but Aloo alone had an

insight on Sodhal's inner feelings and nature. Today too, he knew Sodhal wanted peace of mind but he could not keep himself from asking, "Sodhal, you must be hungry, shall I get something for you?"

"No uncle, but I would like a drink. Do you have any?"

"Son, for you there is everything. The bootlegger brought a pot of white, last night, that is all yours."

In a moment he brought the pot and glass and put it in front of Sodhal and left the room. The first sip of the drink calmed him like a cold shower. He kept drinking, the more he drank the more alert he was. Sleep seemed miles away from his eyes. His mind was having tornados of differing thoughts and he took refuge in the liquor. His senses were overwhelmed by the imagination of Laila's figure, her lips, her arms, her breasts, her belly button, the way she acted; her voice seemed to sting like a bee. He was cross with himself. "I have become so weak that a woman has overcome my heart and mind. If I cannot face a Tarkhan woman, how will Sindh be rid of Tarkhans?"

Uttering the name of Sindh, the irritability and tension in his mind and body eased. The tornados vanished and he pronounced the name again, "Sindh!" He felt as if his body was instilled with new and fresh blood, as if he had drunk water that quenches an eternal thirst. He pronounced the name of Sindh again

and he felt his heart was purified of the sorrows, hurt and anguish he had been experiencing. The name had extinguished the fire that burnt his heart. The poison of hatred was all gone and he felt elated. That name had, like a touchstone made him transform him to gold, and he thought that if his blood was to spill, each drop of that golden blood will give birth to a golden Sindhi. If he was cut into pieces, each piece will form a new body and he was convinced that Sindh will remain for infinite times, he will become immortal and full of emotions he chanted the slogan.... "Jiye Sindh".

The chant took away all his pains; he started making plans in his mind while he lay there on the bed. He thought about conveying Ameer Khan's message to Sanghaar and using that opportunity, they will leave for the hills where they will organize their group and attack the Tarkhans in Thatta. Thinking of Sanghaar's home, he was reminded of Sanwal. The innocent face of Sanwal came to his eyes and he stood up. He asked Aloo to get his horse ready.

When Aloo told him that his horse was ready, Sodhal could not resist taking the old gent in his embrace and said, "Chacha Aloo, I am going to my village, and will be back in a day or two. In the meantime, if you hear about the whereabouts of Sanghaar in Thatta, send for him and get him to wait for me."

The old man looked at this brave warrior of

Sindh with pride and love and when the brown mare was out of sight, he looked at the skies and mumbled, "My Lord, no doubt we have sinned all our lives, but pray forgive us..., keep these brave men safe... who knows Sindh might see better days..." And then he mumbled something to himself and went inside the motel.

Sanghaa's wife Bhagul picked a big chunk of butter from the pot and put it in a bowl, and then straightening the ropes on the churning pot '*mandhiaro*' started to roll them to make more buttermilk. She was worried; it had been three days since Sanghaa had left, although he had mentioned that he will return the next day. It will be the fourth sun. "My Lord, may he return safely." She was praying in her heart while her eyes kept darting towards the door. She was having scary thoughts. She had no control over her man or else she would not have let him leave for the city. She never argued with Sanghaa, had she even done that, he was not one who would listen or be persuaded easily. He could be very stubborn; he was never scared for his life. His acts in the city always brought trouble. Bhagi's husband Aloo Panwhar had warned her many a time, "Aunt! Whenever uncle Sanghaa visits Thatta, he starts fights with Arghuns and Tarkhans, why don't you talk him out of that? Tarkhans are the rulers; I can bet they will deport him out of here!"

Once out of fear of that happening she had

endeavored and said to him, "Hey, listen! Aloo Panhwar tells me that you fight with the Tarkhans and that they might deport us!" Sanghaa's reply shocked her, "Tarkhans can never dare deport me! I am not Aloo Panhwar who got his father arrested and was rewarded with an estate in return for spying for the Tarkhans. He is dependent on Tarkhans and so he worries about deportation. Aloo is the son of your cousin; tell him that he should not say such things of cowardice in my household. Tarkhans deporting me, hah! Am I on their disposal? Nobody is man enough to deport Sanghaa."

She took the cover from the pot and wiped butter off it. When she saw the bowl, the butter was gone; surprised she looked at her sister-in-law who was sewing a quilt in the verandah. Looking around herself she said, "Oh! Did you see that? That devil of a cat ate all the butter right in front of us!"

Her sister-in-law looked up and saw something. She said, "Sister, that's not a cat but a squirrel is cleaning its paws right behind you! I am sure that it is the squirrel who stole your butter!"

With surprise she looked back and found Sanwal sitting there. She started laughing, "My dear, your such act might have caused me to curse the squirrel; come my dear, take this butter and enjoy it." She offered him another chunk of butter from the churning pot. Sanwal was the only son of her brother-

in-law. She had no children of her own and so he was the pupil of everyones' eye. She loved him more than his mother. And because of her love, Sanwal teased her the most. But she always showered her love on him. He was very naughty. He feared no one. He played all day long along with other children of the village and was engaged in mischief of some kind all the time, "Jiji (mother), the taste of stolen butter has no equal! But you have taken out all the butter, what about my whey!?"

"May God grant you a long life; there it is on the shelf. It is a full glass that is if you have not had it already!" She said smiling, for a moment forgetting all her worries about Sanghaar.

Sanwal jumped and went to the shelf and downed the whole glass in a few mouthfuls. Bhagul and his mother looked at him tenderly. When he finished his glass, his mother was still sewing and asked, "Son, why are you back so early from the seminary today?"

"We told the Akhund something that he allowed all of us the day off," he said.

"Oh! So are you going to share it with us?" Bhagul said rising from the platform specially meant for making butter. Sanwal laughed. He was still laughing at the fright the Akhund had felt. He narrated the whole story of how there was a new preacher from

Kandhar who had joined the seminary. We greeted him with a line that we sang, it said:

*Tarkhani turbans on the ground
Like a donkey walks on the mound!"*

Fearing the wrath of the cleric from Kandhar, the teacher sent us all home. When Sanwal said this, Bhagul was reminded of Sanghaar, thinking that it must be true that there was a widespread feeling of hatred against the Tarkhans all over Sindh, and a revolt was imminent. Her heart sank. She had lost two of her young brothers and a nephew in the previous revolt. Her father had been severely injured in the last rebellion. "My Saviour! What have we the Sindhis done wrong? It is our country, our land, our labour and when it is time to sacrifice, it is us the Sindhis on the front to give our lives! That is not fair, my Master, the Tarkhans are living at our expense and now sharpening their weapons again."

"Son, have you done any other mischief?" His mother got concerned; she was always worried about his pranks. The last time they had nearly killed an Arghun in a well. They told the Arghun that a deaf mute Lungi Faqeer knew the place where a treasure was hidden in the godown of the mosque. The Arghun got greedy and asked the deaf-mute who started answering in signs. At this Sanwal and his friends told the Arghun that this saint did not utter a word during the day but if you agree to be taken there blindfolded,

he would take you there. The Arghun happily agreed, so Sanwal took a piece of cloth and blindfolded him and they left him near the well adjacent to the mosque. They also took the deaf-mute faqeer and ran away. As the Arghun tried to find the treasure he fell in the well. He was lucky that the well had been filled with mud as the water had become hard, but still he had sustained some injuries. The Arghun lodged a complaint but the matter was dismissed as there were no witnesses.

"No mother, except we put two cats in the pigeons' cage that belonged to Namdar Khan Charkus", Sanwal said with a smile.

"Son! That is a horrible thing you did. Why hurt innocent birds?" Bhagul felt sympathy towards the pigeons. She had hardly finished her sentence when she heard a rider in the distance approaching their way. In her heart she prayed it to be Sanghaar, but the trot was not of Sanghaar's horse. When the sounds came close, she knew from the horse's noise that it was the mare of her brother-in-law Sodhal. Sodhal's arrival always got her concerned. Sodhal and Sanghaar did not get along each other too well, and his arrival was always a sign of some argument. Her left eyelid twitched and she made a silent prayer.

Sodhal announced himself and came in. On seeing him, Sanwal ran and hugged him calling delightfully, "Chacha! Chacha!"

Amongst all his uncles, Sanwal loved Sodhal the most. The bright face, strongly built body and numerous stories of his prowess and bravado surrounding Sodhal had made him a hero in Sanwal's eyes. Sodhal too liked his nephew very much. Perhaps he saw his own reflection in Sanwal as he was also known to be moody, fearless and even more than that his wide chest, his bluish grey eyes, and a tough body was something he loved the most. Whenever he visited them, he spent his time with Sanwal. They would stroll in the lands; go to the riverside or the hills. He used to tell him many stories about the motherland. From the Greeks to Jam Feroze, he used to narrate the history of the bravery of Sindhis, their sacrifices and their revolts. He told him about the internal rifts between the Sindhis, the tortures of the invaders and about the arson and looting committed by the foreigners. He used to tell him the difference between freedom and slavery. He had told him at numerous occasions about droughts every third year of foreigners' rule before the Soomra and the Sama eras. During the reign of these local dynasties, Sindh never saw a famine. And when the Kandharis invaded and Sindh was enslaved, droughts returned every third year. People were drained of their resources, whatever they grew was taken away by the Kandhari scavengers. People started starving despite having harvested their crops and above all, whenever Sindh was enslaved, her people were banished from speaking their own language.

Arabs wanted them to speak in Arabic; Kandharis wanted them to speak in Persian. When a nation faces a curb on its language, it is time for them to sacrifice; because language is what gives a person his identity, humane nature and a forced foreign language deprives him from his natural behavior, it will give rise to an artificial and un-natural personality. For some reason Sanwal liked these stories so much that he used to forget all his mischief, his school and his friends. All he liked was to keep visiting the villages and lands with his uncle Sodhal.

But today Sodhal was in deep thoughts as after exchanging greetings with both of his sisters-in-law, he sat on a charpoy staring at the ground. After a while he asked, "Sister, where is Sanghaar?"

"Brother, it is the fourth sun today but he has not returned...., he had said he would return in a day", Bhagul replied trying to hide her sigh.

"Where did he go?" Sodhal asked briefly.

"To Nangar Thatta, he took some wool, he said he would buy two or three ajraks and shawls on his way back."

"Ah!" His exclamation had a whole story hidden in it but Bhagul could not catch it. Sodhal stood up and went to the door. Bhagul go! scared, this was the first time Sodhal was going back without eating

anything. In order to calm her curiosity she said, "Brother, would you not have food today?"

"No sister, I have to go look for Sanghaar and it's a long way to go. Okay Sanwal! We could not chat this time but....., some other time. God be with you." He opened the door and left.

The winds from the north started blowing in the afternoon; and within no time dark blue clouds quickened their pace and got thicker as time went by. Winds sped up and the ducts of the wind catchers squealed with sounds of wind that echoed in the houses. People covered themselves with shawls, ajraks and mufflers. Those visiting the town were hurrying up with their businesses and readying their horses to leave early. The shops of the town closed earlier than usual. It was not the cold winds that caused all this; the pride of Thatta Akhund Saleh, who was respected by people so much, was hanged in the square besides the mosque. The old wounds of Sindhis had opened up. Women herded their children and locked their homes, praying for the safe return of their men. If a rider passed in the lane, people peeped through the cracks of the windows. The north wind had brought the smell of blood with it. People shut their shops and headed towards the square near the Jamia Mosque....., they wanted to have a last look at their brother..., Akhund Saleh, a man who used to settle feuds, advice people in matrimonial matters and in punishing the culprits. He

mingled well with them, and laughed with the people; where will the people go now? In his presence the Tarkhan courts were empty as people preferred to settle their scores through Akhund Saleh's judgments. During his days, crime was unheard of, and the people, especially women visited the markets without any fear. Men used to go to mosques to offer prayers leaving their shops open. He was so revered that even the Tarkhans did not dare causing trouble outside their own neighbourhoods; that Akhund Saleh was hung limp on the hanging board in front of hundreds of Sindhis. They quietly looked at the two boys with chopped off tongues and bleeding from their mouths. The spark inside their hearts burned but even the northerly wind was not enough to convert that spark into flames of fire. That required ignition of some other kind, it needed a storm.

Old Aloo had also been to the square and biting his lips, he tried to control his tears. Instead of bidding farewell to his guests, he was searching their eyes..., for a spark, a fire but all he saw was tears just like his own. Their eyes were sodden, faces ashen as they quietly loaded their bullock carts and camels for their journeys... So they could go home and hide their faces and cry their hearts out.

Suddenly on hearing the sound of a galloping horse, Aloo stepped out, he recognized Sodhal from a distance; he was surprised how Sodhal was back so

soon. But like a spart of light, aray of hope, he was reassured. "Our Sodhal will do something about it!" As if Aloo had been waiting for Sodhal, he ran and held the reins of his mare.

"Uncle! Is everything alright?" Sodhal saw the worried look on the old man's face.

"Son, nothing is alright! On the issue of forcefully teaching Persian, Tarkhans have hanged Akhund Saleh and chopped the tongues of two young lads who are tied to a pole in the square near the mosque."

Sodhal felt as if someone had hit a heavy blow on his face, his hands dug into the reins so hard that the mare almost choked. He bit his lip and said, "Is Sanghaar in town?"

"I did hear that Akhund Noor Muhammad has sent him somewhere on an important assignment.

Sodhal did not appear to hear anything; blood went from his arms and legs to his temples and his eyes. His eyes were blurred from the pressure and in order to stop the tears, he jerked the reins with a force that nearly killed the mare. But the animal got her master's thoughts and she started at a pace that it had never done. Within moments Sodhal saw Akhund Saleh's body hanging from the board. Scores of people surrounded the body; only one side was open where the Tarkhan soldiers stood with their weapons drawn.

Sodhal gave a subtle signal and the mare went through the sentries like lightning. His dagger sliced through the back of the rider guarding the pole who went limp on his horse. That instant Sodhal snatched his sword but since the mare had overshot the spot, he turned the mare around and this time two swords he had went through the chests of two more guards. This tornado of a man took them by total surprise and before they could react, the screams of another soldier wreaked the skies. He turned the mare and brought it in front of the hanging torso of Akhund Saleh. People were looking at this devil of death with fear and astonishment. Sodhal cut the rope from Akhund's neck and slowly got his body on his mare; he faced the crowd and said, "Sindhis, you cursed people! You were in hundreds as compared to Tarkhans, but silently watched this mayhem happening. They have cut the tongues of your children and you have become mutes yourselves, had you confronted them even with your bare hands, Akhund Saleh would have been alive. Here! Take his body, bury him and go hide your faces in your pillows and cry!"

He brought the body to the crowd, where two men took the body. Sodhal turned the mare and came to the boys. They had bled so much that their faces looked white. One of them had his neck stretched in a way that told Sodhal that he had breathed his last. The other one was unconscious; Sodhal signalled to a couple of men and handed the boys over to them.

Suddenly it felt as if there was a storm, the sounds of a sea of horse-riders was approaching them. It was clear that it was heading there. They were almost sure that the soldiers had brought Ameer Khan and his men, but that was not the case. They saw a few students running towards them, Sodhal waited. The students were shouting, "Mirza Jan Baba's forces have reached Thatta and are after Mirza Baqi..... Mirza Baqi's forces are abandoning their cantonments... Sindhis, ..., this is time, a time to get rid of a brutal man like Mirza Baqi...."

People had been waiting for such a moment and thousands of Sindhis headed towards Tarkhan neighbourhoods. Some of them had sticks, knives and daggers while others were bare handed. In a short while Mirza Jan Baba's troops joined them. Sindhis chanted, "Long live Mirza Jan Baba, down with Mirza Baqi"!

Mirza Jan Baba led his troops and these chants made him feel stronger. He replied, "Well done bravemen, go ahead and tear Mirza Baqi and his men to pieces and feed them to the dogs of Thatta..... Allahu Akbar, advance and surround them like eagle."

The sound of horses mixed with chants of men, marching soldiers and their shouts created an atmosphere of D-Day. It looked like the earth would explode and the seas will storm in and the skies will just fall to pieces.

Sodhal stood confused; he did not know what was going on. He could not understand the revolt of Sindhis. Sindhis support for wolves against a tiger in their ranks was something he could not take, and his head was bowed with shame. He was full of shame instead of anger on this inept attitude of his countrymen. The very people who were to throw the Tarkhans out of Sindh were joining their folds. For the first time he felt helpless and weak, and he put his fists in the withers of the mare and said, "This is not my war!" The crowd and their noises were crushing his thoughts and he just stood there helplessly. When he was all alone, he sighed for the first time and turned his mare towards Aloo's motel.

The beautiful sky of Sindh was slowly waking up to the brightness of dawn. Stars blinked as if trying to keep awake and shone intermittently as the moon looked at the fading stars. In this sleepy and cold end of the past night, the sounds of drums and dance echoed through to Sanghaar's ears. Janan heard them too, and in unison of understanding, both of them turned the direction of their horses towards the sounds. The horses were tired but kept going. At some distance they saw the torches, and as they closed in they saw the shadows of tents in the light of the flames. They stopped near thick woods and waited. Sounds of laughter reached them with the cold breeze. They held their horses idly and started planning their next move. Janan thought of something and said, "Sanghaar, brother I have a right on Kokiltash, keep that in mind!" Sanghaar did not reply initially but after a pause, he took a deep breath and said, "Janan, do not consider your personal vendetta higher than the cause of Sindh!"

"The cause and the fight for Sindh is also our very personal war."

"You are right. But first we have to find that

letter that Kokiltash takes to Kandhar, if he dies it will become difficult to get that document."" Sanghaar explained.

Janan thought deeply. They tied the horses and slowly started walking towards the tents. They decided that once they get in Kokiltash's tent, they will scare him into giving them the letter. But when they got to the tents, what they saw reminded them of their personal vendetta which makes one ready to give any sacrifice. These were the feelings that arose from the brutalities and atrocities of a man towards the other. They saw about 20 Tarkhans sitting in the form of a circle. On a special couch Kokiltash sat relaxed with a glass of wine in his hand. A Turk boy was sitting on his knee, and he was fondling his cheeks. Their eyes were fixed to the center of the circle where a fire made of coal was burning and two Sindhis were hopping on the red hot coal. Three soldiers with swords were making them dance on the burning coal. Two Turk boys were playing music on '*daff*' and the other Tarkhans were laughing as if they were enjoying the scene. Some had boys sitting in their laps, who were tickling the men and giggling at them. In the noise of the laughter and music, the Sindhi boys jumped, as if on the beat. The scene was so inhuman and painful that Sanghaar bit his lip, the taste of blood from the cut went to his mouth and burned his throat. Janan drew his weapon and then two daggers pierced the darkness and landed on Kokiltash's throat. Janan signalled and Sanghaar

took one of the Tarkhans and threw him in the fire. All of this happened so quickly that most of the Tarkhans did not know what was happening. Some of them were so drunk that they continued laughing on the scenario.

Sanghaar left the fallen soldier and leapt on another one who was drawing his weapon but before he could throw that at Sanghaar, he held his arm and slashed his chest with his axe. That Tarkhan doubled up in pain. Sanghaar was so mad with rage that he was attacking any Tarkhan in sight, they were trying to run and hide in tents, some fell with wounds on their throats and chests, some fell in the fire in an attempt to run. Their screams and cries of the Turk boys shook the horizon, but Sanghaar kept ravaging his foes with slaps, punches and whatever he could lay his hands on.

The Sindhis who had been dancing on fire saw Sanghaar in amazement. They too picked up the weapons from the fallen soldiers and fought along with their saviour. They had forgotten their burnt feet and they avenged their burns by fighting the enemy. If they found a Tarkhan crying with pain, they put him to an eternal sleep.

When Janan came out of Kokiltash's tent, he had a royal trunk with him. What he saw outside stunned him, Sanghaar had killed more than 10 Tarkhans and injured so many others. The Sindhi boys were also by his side. When Sanghaar spotted Janan, he asked from a distance, "Janan, did you get the letter?"

“Yes, the letter was in this trunk along with gifts.”

The tension in Sanghaar’s face eased a bit and coming forward he stood near Kokiltash’s corpse, both of them kept looking at Kokiltash, whose blood had reddened the earth. Sanghaar held Janan by his arm and said, “Brother, at least one of the enemies of Sindh is dead.”

They looked back at the two Sindhi men, who were now sitting on the ground and were applying cold mud on the blisters on their feet. They told them that they were brothers and this was their land, a little further on, they had a barn where they stored their wheat and other grains. They were guarding it from any intrusion when the Tarkhans came. Without any rhyme or reason, they were arrested and told that the Sindhis were slaves of Tarkhans and they were ordered to wash the feet of all the Tarkhan riders. On refusing to do so, they were slapped and kicked and then a fire was lit and they were made to dance on it.

Janan could not stop himself and said, “Brothers, Sindhis will have to bear all these atrocities till Sindh is freed. May God give Sindhis the wisdom to understand that.”

Sanghaar saddled two horses of the Tarkhans and handed them over to the brothers so they could go to their village, and said, “Brother, when you get time

from your own worries and problems, think about how to get rid of these rascals. Have you not heard the proverb: 'one beside one makes eleven'- unity makes you strong. If all the villages agree, unite and plan to throw these vultures out, that day would not be far when Sindh would be freed from these devils."

With this new ideal in their hearts, the two brothers left for their homes, thinking on the way about what they had learnt. Sanghaar and Janan took two horses and headed towards Thatta. Their hearts felt lighter and so did the skies, the moon winked at the stars that shone filling the galaxy with their twinkling light.

They were still about 3 miles from Thatta when Janan's horse fell, Janan had luckily jumped just before the poor animal fell or he would have been crushed under it. It was still afternoon and they had travelled a very long distance. The horses had been drenched in sweat and they too were tired. Janan tried to pull the horse on its feet. Sanghaar dismounted from his horse and examined the fallen animal, "Janan, looks like the poor animal has gone to its Maker; I think we should take a break."

"If that's what you say," Janan agreed making no attempt to hide his sleepiness.

They cleared a little piece of ground between the woods and putting their arms under their heads lay

down, sleep was instant. They felt like having slept only a little while when the sound of passing horses woke them up. It was already after sunset and darkness had spread its wings on the horizon.

. "Friend, I think we slept a bit too much..!" Janan was slightly worried.

Sanghaa was angry with himself. On seeing the trunk, he remembered Akhund Saleh's advice who had got a message from Akhund Noor Muhammad and had said to them, "Brothers, everything depends on that letter. If that letter from the Tarkhans gets to Kandhar, rest assured Sindh will never be free. On the other hand, if we do get hold of that letter, it will clear a lot of things. I suspect that the Kandharis have written to the Iranian King against King Akbar. If we get this letter and show it to Akbar, he will uproot the Tarkhans from Sindh, and there may arise a way for freedom of Sindh. God be with you, try and get to Thatta before you rest...."

Sanghaa was ashamed; he came out of the woods and stood on the little road. He signalled to a rider on the road from a distance. The rider wondered as to who was stopping him and whether he should stop at all. But in the end he stopped.

"Brother, who are you? Where are you rushing to?" Sanghaa asked.

"I am a Syed from the Shirazi Syeds, there is mayhem in Thatta, God help us. I am headed to my village."

"Why, is everything okay? What has happened in Thatta? Another revolt?" Sanghaar asked nervously, Janan joined them.

"Have you not heard the news? Yesterday the mayor Ameer Khan got Akhund Saleh killed, Mirza Jan Baba attacked Thatta but the revolt was unsuccessful. Now Mirza Baqi is mad with rage, he is getting everyone coming in his way trampled under elephants' feet...., he has allowed his men to enter the households of the rebels to arrest them," the Syed was obviously harassed.

"What? What did you say? Ameer Khan has got Akhund Saleh killed..!" Sanghaar took a deep breath and his hand tightened over the horse's withers.

"That is right. Akhund Saleh did not agree to have Persian taught in schools in place of Sindhi...., they hanged him on a pole near the mosque..., brother! These rascals"

The rider was about to say something but Sanghaar interrupted and said, "Syed Sahib, forgive me but you will have to lend me your horse. We have got to reach Thatta and one of our horses is dead...."

Sanghaar was talking to himself. He did not

realize that the Syed had refused point blank to lend him his horse, he lifted him like a child from the horse and the next moment he dug his heels in the horse's midriff sending it to a gallop within seconds. He forgot his friend Janan was also with him. Janan got the trunk and came after him. Tears rolled from his cheeks. How could they have killed Akhund Saleh..., the saint of Thatta, its pride and honor? So many things crossed Janan's mind.

On reaching the river, instead of going into town, Sanghaar headed towards the neighborhood where Tarkhans had their mansions. Mirza Baqi's mansion was right at the river bank.

There was always a very tight security on these mansions, but that evening there were guards everywhere. The sounds of chanting and fighting from the town could be heard even at this distance. But it looked like Sanghaar's ears had been blocked. When he reached the entrance of the area he saw about 10 Tarkhans guarding it. Janan called him; he had almost forgotten Janan was with him. He stopped for a moment and looking at the Tarkhans, he said to Janan, "Janan, we could not keep our promise to Akhund Saleh, now you go and deliver the letter to Akhund Noor Muhammad...God be with you..., if I live, we shall meet again."

Janan had no strength to hear anymore, his heart was broken. But delivering the letter to Akhund Noor

Muhammad was also important. He stared at Sanghaar's face and said, "Sanghaar, look after yourself.... Sindh still needs brave men like you...okay so long! ...Jiye Sindh."

Janan turned his horse around and left and Sanghaar started towards the Tarkhans. Before they could do anything, Sanghaar's horse went through them and reached inside the area. Outside the mansion, the guards had made a mound of swords and were watching the gate. Two large torches stood on the front of special holders. Sanghaar knew that this had to be Mirza Baqi's mansion, but entering through the front was out of question. So he crossed it and kept passing in front of the mansions, taking note of the height of the walls. When he was far ahead of all the mansions, he halted the horse and dismounted. There he saw in the dark a couple of guards and that behind the mansions were the stables and even further down there was the beginning of a cantonment. There was only one way to enter Mirza Baqi's mansion and that was by entering the adjacent house, from there he could jump into the river and swim to the back wall of Mirza Baqi's mansion. But the adjacent house was also heavily guarded. Were the docks on the back guarded or not? Wondering about all these possibilities, he continued walking in the dark. He crossed Mirza Baqi's mansion and headed towards the adjacent house with a stride showing he was there for some business.

A couple of guards advanced when they saw a Sindhi approaching. One of them gave him an angry look and said, "Who are you? And how dare you come to a Tarkhan area?"

"Whose mansion is this?" He asked them ignoring their question.

"Ameer Khan's, the mayor of Thatta!" The guard spat back.

"Then I have come to the correct place." Sanghaar said this and moved forward. "Tell him Sanghaar Khan is here to see him, and has brought an important message for him."

"Ameer Khan is not at home", the guard interrupted Sanghaar.

Sanghaar posed as if he was thinking, and then staring at the guard he said, "then is there someone who I can deliver the message to?"

The guard thought for a moment and asked, "who is it from?"

"That I will not tell you, but it's about Mirza Jan Baba....." Sanghaar lied.

The guard was stunned, they knew Mirza Jan Baba had taken refuge with the Sindhis, and perhaps this man has brought some information about his whereabouts. The guards looked at each other, and

then one of them said, "Where is Mirza Jan Baba?"

"Oh no man! I am not telling you. I do not want to get killed. If I tell anyone, it has to be a close confidante of Ameer Khan." Sanghaar knew his trick had worked. The head money for Mirza Jan Baba must be in millions and to get any news regarding him was something Ameer Khan's men will leave no stone unturned to find. He posed to turn around, when one of the guards held him by the arm, "Okay come, we shall ask the Munshi."

They brought him to the door where four soldiers were present. They too asked the same things and resolved that they should consult Mir Munshi and if he considered that the message was that important, they would force the Sindhi to stay. Sanghaar appeared to not comprehend anything happening around him. One of the guards knocked the door. A small window opened in the gate and the guard inside was told about the matter.

"Okay, stay there. I shall get him to be called here," he said and closed the window.

The guards started making fun of Mirza Jan Baba. Sanghaar stood with them and posed as if he was trying to understand them. He laughed when they did. After a while the window opened and the guard announced that Mir Munshi was coming.

The guards stopped chatting and became attentive and Sanghaar kept standing in front of them as if he had been told to. A little while later a smaller door within the large gate opened and a short man appeared. In the light of the torches Sanghaar noted his goatee beard and a blind eye. He was still in the door when Sanghaar leapt at him on the door. The shorter man stumbled down like a child but Sanghaar was already inside the door and before the guard inside could react, Sanghaar's dagger pierced the guard's back; he pushed him and locked the door from inside. The guards outside kept banging on the door. Sanghaar held Mir Munshi by his collar and ordered him to walk. Munshi trembled like a fish and kept looking at this giant of a man with fear.

In the front of the house, there were stables for the horses housing 5-6 horses. Just ahead of the stables was a stone laid pathway that led to the living and womens'quarters. Keeping Munshi at his front Sanghaar kept advancing. When they reached the garden, he saw the beautiful fountains and the feminine figurines that were so pretty that he could not keep his eyes off them. Taking that chance, Munshi ran towards the womens'quarters. The sound of his running jolted Sanghaar out of the trance of the scenic beauty; he was angry with himself. Munshi knocked the door and shouted something in Persian. Sanghaar went to the door that opened up and two very dark complexioned eunuchs confronted him. Both had

daggers with long handles in their hands. For a moment Sodhal was overawed by their huge size even though Sanghaar himself was a more than average sized man. Each one of them was at least double his size. Their upper torso was not covered by any clothes and their oiled bodies made them look really ferocious. Their eyes had the cruel look of a wolf and within seconds he was planning on how to deal with these giants and thinking about it he started taking a few steps backwards. The eunuchs advanced towards him without any fear. They thought that their prey was trying to find a way to run away and he reminded them of scores of people they had torn apart with their bare hands. Getting back, Sanghaar passed a big torch on the fountain, which he swiftly picked up and shoved it in the face of one of them. Sanghaar had never heard such a scary and prolonged scream, just like an animal slaughtered without restraining its mouth. That scream echoed throughout the mansion. The giant eunuch held his face in his hands and sat down. The second guy, after seeing his partner's condition feared the torch and it was him who retreated this time. Near the stairs of the womens' room Sanghaar waved the torch, the eunuch did not notice the stairs behind him and fell. His dagger fell out of his hand which Sanghaar picked up and touched the burning torch to the eunuch's eyes; his scream was more feminine and squeaky while he rubbed his face on the stairs.

Sanghaa held the torch and went to the door. Seeing the closed door he got suspicious, and getting back a couple of steps, he held the eunuch by his hair and said to him in Persian, "If you make one wrong move, this dagger will go through your stomach."

The giant did not seem to understand what Sanghaa said but quietly and like a blind man, pushed the door. The door opened with a screech and as soon as he tumbled forward, two daggers pierced his chest at the same time. The eunuch's scream was choked in his throat. In the light of the torch, Sanghaa saw another couple of eunuchs attacking their own guy. Before they could realize their mistake, Sanghaa's knife pierced the stomach of one of them, the other one saw the torch coming towards his face, the fire of which closed up on him so much to burn his eyes but before he could raise his hands to protect them, his eyes were blinded forever and he fell to the floor crying in pain.

Leaving them there Sanghaa advanced through many rooms, cursing the Tarkhans when he saw the riches of the rooms that had been stolen from Sindhis, until he came to a room from where he thought he could enter the river. An elderly woman came out of the room with her hands held together in fear and begged for mercy.

Her voice had an elderly touch and Sanghaa's feeling of mercy returned for her. He put his hand on

her head and said, "Mother, we Sindhis never raise our hand on a woman." He slowly pushed the door and what he saw inside was something he could never narrate. Right ahead of him, a beautiful woman, as if a fairy of extreme beauty sat in front of a dressing table combing her waist long hair. Her fabric showed her uncovered shoulders, half of her face was covered by her hair and the remaining half was so pretty; Sanghaar felt a sweet feeling for her in his heart. The revealing fabric showed her body parts as if they had a glow of their own that shone through her clothes. The movements of her bosom reminded him of the a boat floating on the waves of the Indus River, as if they were calling him to come in their hold. And when she spoke, he was scared of himself, was he forgetting his aim!

"Sindhi, you came eventually! I was sure you would definitely come back. How I have waited for you?"

The magic in her voice entered through his ears and reached his heart. He felt the milieu of the room singing him a lullaby and he thought he was falling into an eternal sleep. He heard the magical voice again when she whispered, slightly confused, "No, no..., "No, no..., you are not him.... but why is my heart longing for you...? Come.., come to me..., my God! How I have waited for you, you will fill up for his absence.... in you, I see him."

She put the mirror down and stood up. Sanghaar kept looking at her and he felt his heart soften like wool. Suddenly the sounds of footsteps from the outside woke him up to the real world. At the same moment, the magic spoke, "Guards are here....., shut the door."

Sanghaar sprang back to reality and he bolted the door from inside. Guards were banging on the door, Sanghaar threw a look at her and looked up, his eyes shone in a way as if they were saying, "Love, if I live, I shall come back, do wait for me...."

He looked around and saw a silk rope holding a curtain. He snatched that rope, made a noose out of it and threw it on the brackets of the window. The noose tightened around a latch and he climbed out. He saw that Mirza Baqi's house was quite far and was heavily guarded; he took the rope on the other side and slowly descended into the river. He submerged himself under the water and swam towards the mansion.

Just below the mansion, he noticed 3 to 4 boats; from one of the more decorated ones he saw a staircase made of ropes that led to a window. He could see the shadows of the guards there too. He went under the boats and came out where he could see only a couple of guards. Reaching that spot, he had still not figured out how to reach the high wall of the mansion that was almost impossible to climb without a rope. Without making a sound, he returned slowly to the boat and

peeped through at the deck. He thought if he were to take the anchoring rope he would have to climb up to the deck and could be spotted, and it would be impossible to get into the mansion if the guards were alerted. He came around the boat; he noticed that it was tied to another boat with a thin rope. Soundlessly he cut it, and pushed the boat slightly. The boat started moving slowly with the stream and he followed. When the current became a bit stronger, the Tarkhan soldier on the board noticed its movement and realizing that the other boats were quite far from him, he started shouting for help. But the boat was too far for his voice to be heard and looking at the futility of calling for help he took the control and tried turning the boat but Sanghaa was ready for him. He held the control and pulled it causing the Tarkhan to lose balance and just then he pushed him into the river. He came back to the deck and getting hold of a sizeable amount of rope, he started to swim towards the wall of the fort.

He climbed the fort wall and walking on it, he made his way to the roof. Hiding behind the air ducts, he came to a roof that had a rope stair descending to the boats. The roof was made of red tiles and timber wood. He checked the chimnies and looking for a wide enough air duct, he came to the desired spot. He lifted the lid and looked down, the room was dimly lit but he could see some jars of wine nicely decorated on a shelf, and just beside it lay a sword in its sheath. Having done the survey, Sanghaa sat down and waited for the

right moment. The starry night was getting colder and his wet clothes increased the chilling effect of the cool breeze. He felt sleepy as he was tired and cold, but he forced himself to remain awake. When it was quite late in the night and the guards had also spread out, he fixed the rope to the air duct so that it remained open and very slowly started his descent. He thought it cowardly to kill a man, even if any enemy, in his sleep. Mirza Baqi lay straight on his bed, his wife was in his embrace in a way, and it felt as if even in her sleep she was ready to sacrifice herself for her spouse. Beside the bed a candle was spreading a dim yellow light in the room. He was confused and he thought about the weakness of a person in such condition.

A noise outside the room caught his attention, and instantly he took Mirza Baqi's sword from its sheath. Right then the door opened and he saw a couple of Tarkhans with drawn weapons approach Mirza Baqi's bed. The wind from the open door caused the candle to fall over and the room was now pitch dark. Sanghaar held the sword and advanced towards the bed but his foot hit the candle holder and that very moment he heard a woman's scream; he attacked the bed with his sword but it cut through only the empty bed. He looked around and noticed a man opening the window facing the river and climbed out. He ran towards the window and he heard a splash echo in the silent river. He looked down from the window, a boat was moving towards the spot where the splash was

heard. Sanghaar heard a sound behind him and he leapt away from the window, a dagger landed on the window sill. Sanghaar quickly blocked the Tarkhan's way and shoved him out of the window into the river.

There was silence in the room. Sanghaar was sure that the guards and supporters of the attackers will soon be in the room so he ran towards the door. The dim light coming from the corridor was enough for him to see Mirza Baqi's wife lying sprawled on the floor with a large gash on her neck that had caused the neck to take a rather awkward angle. He was now sure that the man who had jumped out was Mirza Baqi himself and he was mad with himself for his folly. Today the murderer of Sindh, the killer of Akhund Saleh had escaped because of a petty emotion that had overcome him.

In the darkness he searched for the other Tarkhan. He looked back and saw the Tarkhan bent over the corpse of the slain woman, busy removing the jewellery from her neck and ears. He thought these were not humans but vultures and in a fit of rage, he sliced the Tarkhan's neck off his shoulders with one mighty stroke of the sword. Again for a moment there was silence,, followed by the sounds of many men approaching in his direction and he climbed his way out through the duct he had come through.

Jumping into the river he was wondering how he lost his ideal for petty thoughts. He was full of

remorse and shame. Had he killed Baqi, people would have thought it to be due to an internal rift between the Tarkhans and the Sindhis would have been spared of any allegation. A moment's mistake had given a new token of life to Baqi. Climbing the wall of Ameer Khan's mansion, he felt he had no reason to live anymore. He had lost a chance to avenge Akhund Saleh, thinking of whom he thought of Sodhal. May Sodhal take upon himself the duty of avenging Akhund Saleh's murder but what would Sodhal think of him when he comes to know. He would leave for some place where not even his friends would be able to reach him. Thinking of that, he jumped into Laila's room.

After leading the Morning Prayer, Akhund Noor Muhammad looked at the people. Right in front of him an elderly Tarkhan busied himself in recitation with so much devotion; he swayed from side to side as if under a trance. There were only eight people who were reciting the Quran after prayers. Most of the people had left. The ones who were reciting the holy book were mostly Tarkhans. Rolling his rosary's beads Akhund Noor Muhammad wondered, "They pray, celebrate every day of religious festivities, rule in the name of religion, collect revenue and taxes in the name of faith, but when it comes to cruelty and brutality, they are animals of the worst kind. They have every kind of monstrosity in them, they drink, womanize, behave like infidels but Almighty Allah has favoured them!!!" "Nauzu-billah" (I seek refuge in Allah) came out of his lips. "My Lord, please forgive me, for I have sinned by thinking in such a manner" and he bowed his head in prayer. He kept praying for a long time, and when he stood up he noticed the same old Tarkhan whose recitation was now audible in the silence of the mosque. With time all the men left and Akhund Noor Muhammad was left on his own with this Tarkhan.

Noticing an empty mosque, the Tarkhan put the Holy Book in its cover and placed it on a high shelf. Passing by Akhund Noor Muhammad he whispered, "Jiye Sindh, sir!!"

Akhund Noor Muhammad was stunned. He had been pondering over the events of the past few days, and while rolling his beads he was silently uttering holy names. The revolt of Mirza Jan Baba, the attacks of Shah Qasim Arghun, Mirza Baqi jumping out of his window and going with his soldiers after Mirza Jan Baba; and the everyday killing of innocent citizens of Thatta by the soldiers were breaking his heart. Sindhis' blood flowed like water, their women were being dishonoured in public; in a couple of neighborhoods where Sindhis fought back, their houses were set on fire. Mirza Baqi was behaving like a rabid dog, in order to avenge himself he had sent violent elephants in these areas and had trampled innocent children, young and old men. Akhund Noor Muhammad's eyes welled up with tears, "Oh my Lord, how unfair is all this!" He had been silently complaining to his Maker and when he heard someone whisper, "Jiye Sindh", he was stunned. He looked around and then looked at the Tarkhan, whose eyes shone and he came near Akhund and bowed to kiss his feet. Astonished with his actions, he kept looking at the Tarkhan when he heard, "I am Dadan, sir!"

Akhund Noor Muhammad felt dizzy and trying

to get up he said, "Dadan... you...!" and he hugged Dadan and kissed his forehead. He then said, "Idiot, what made you dress like that, I was about to curse you like the other Tarkhans..!"

Dadan removed the Tarkhani turban and the artificial beard and said, "Sir, it would have been impossible to reach you without this camouflage."

"Which means that the news has spread all around", Akhund said while putting his prayer beads in his pocket.

"Yes sir. I heard about Mirza Jan Baba's revolt in Sehwan and that Tarkhans have started taking revenge from Sindhis of Thatta and other towns. Mirza Baqi considers Mirza Jan Baba's attempt an instigation by Sindhis especially the Samejo, Unar and Jarejo clans."

"I was wrong on my part this time; I did not arrange groups of Sindhis to protect their areas like the last time. I do not know why but I felt that the Tarkhans soldiers would stand up against Mirza Baqi's atrocities but that was not to be. The students of the seminaries did what they could, but after Akhund Saleh, they too are heart broken", Akhund Noor Muhammad sighed.

"After Akhund Saleh? Why, is everything okay with him?...What happened to him?" Dadan's heart sank.

"These cruel people hanged him the very same day when Mirza Jan Baba was launching his attack on Thatta."

"But why.....?"

"Mirza Baqi had invited some preachers from Kandahar to teach Persian in place of Sindhi. Akhund Saleh did not allow them to do so in his seminary..." "Oh God! Where will we get a man like him... Listen Dadan, you need to leave for Thatta and take control of his seminary. I will give you the proclamation...." Akhund said all that staring into Dadan's eyes.

"But sir, the work in Delhi is still unfinished.. Nawab Saeed of Lahore has given this letter for you...." Dadan fetched a piece of paper from his shirt.

"My vision is not so good...please read it to me." Akhund urged.

Dadan started reading and Akund listened keenly; Nawab Saeed had written that King Akbar would not interfere directly in the affairs of Sindh, albeit he would inform the Emperor of the atrocities committed by Mirza Baqi. If the negotiations of Mirza Baqi with the Iranians could be presented with proofs, things could take a new turn. The king might be in Lahore next spring where he would try and meet him and brief him about the prevailing conditions. In the end he had shown his gratitude for the gifts.

"Ah! It means that our gifts have not influenced the Nawab...What do the people of Multan think?" Akhund Noor Muhammad asked.

"Obviously people of Multan would prefer allegiance to Delhi rather than the Tarkhans. They would not like to have a tussle with the Moghul Empire at this juncture. But if a movement starts from Sindh, they will, like always, help their own countrymen. The Soomros, Langahs and other clans are ready to provide their men for this cause.....,"Dadan replied.

"A movement in Sindh....., movement in Sindh! Whenever something starts in Sindh, the life of Sindhis becomes unbearable. Their lack of backup support gives Tarkhans a free hand in causing mayhem. About the question of asking help from the Moghuls, there are many Sindhis who do not wish to accept slavery from one to the other ruler.They say that Tarkhans are limited only in Sindh and if an organized movement starts from Thatta to Multan, it would not be so difficult to uproot the Tarkhans as it would if the Moghuls take permanent holdings and cantonments after defeating the Tarkhans..... In a way they are right, fighting a Moghul emperor is something way beyond the Sindhis."

"But sir, these Tarkhans are murderers.The Moghuls might appear as rulers but at least this every day killing will stop, the Sindhis will have some

breathing space.....', Dadan said grumpily.

"But if the Moghuls settle here, it would be impossible to get rid of them. Tarkhans are having their own internal mutinies; defeating them should not be that difficult. They are not as strong; when a ruler starts becoming cruel and brutal towards its people, it is a sign of his weakness; in fact consider it as their end which is imminent. And the atrocities make people feel for each other and they come closer to prepare for a final assault. If only the Sindhis could have a little discipline and if they form a small army of their own, it would not be difficult to show the rulers the road to Kandhar." Akhund Noor Muhammad was imagining loudly.

"While we wait for Sindhis to become disciplined, scores of Tarkhans are heading from Kandhar like locust. Internally they do not get along well with Iran. But looking at the riches of Sindh, caravans after caravans are arriving everyday." Dadan said grinding his teeth.

"I know Nawab Saeed is right about Iran and Kandhar. The Moghuls are trying to find excuses to get Kandhar under their control. Only if the Moghuls get the news that Mirza Baqi is conspiring with Shah Abbass, Moghuls will not let Tarkhans rule for a single day...., but wait. Your brother Sanghaar has sent this letter he got from Kokiltash, I had almost forgotten. Akhund Saleh had heard about this letter from one of

his sources."

Akhund Noor Muhammad stood and just behind the shelf where the Holy Quran was kept, he slid his hand into a crevice and fished out a letter; he gave it to Dadan and said, "Read this, it might contain something useful."

Dadan opened the letter and started reading. It was written by Mirza Baqi and was addressed to the ruler of Kandhar. The letter contained information about the gifts for the ruler in addition to gifts for the king of Iran; and it contained quite an open demonstration of hatred for Moghuls, especially for Emperor Akbar.

After listening to the letter, Akhund stood up suddenly and said, "Dadan, this letter must reach Akbar. You are to leave for Delhi today and somehow get to the palace of the emperor and assure him of Sindhis allegiance. If Akbar's troops descend on Tarkhans, there will arise a way for freedom of Sindh."

Dadan did not reply; he was busy thinking about the future of Sindh. He had remained outside Sindh for so long now that he hardly knew the problems of Sindh. Just to get rid of the Tarkhans and for peace and tranquility of Sindh, he was ready to get help from Moghuls. For years he had lived in Multan, Lahore, Delhi and Agra where he had told the Moghuls about stories of Tarkhan atrocities. The Moghuls, who

had been victors, heard him sympathetically but offered only a few words of encouragement. It enraged Dadan but looking at the times, he used to flatter them. He gave the people of the palace special gifts and numerous souvenirs. Akhund Noor Muhammad's students used to collect antiquities from the region for Dadan. For some reason he had high hopes that Akbar will do something for Sindh. He had tried many methods to get to the palace. Ranging from gifts, souvenirs and offers of mayorships of towns of Sindh, he had tried every method to get to see Akbar in his assembly. He got goose pimples even remembering the conditions he had gone through to achieve his goal. Especially an incident that had almost changed his entire life, remembering which his heart started beating faster. And hearing about going to Agra, his mind was numb and begging his leave from the Akhund, he left. On his way he remembered the whole incident in its entirety.

He had been in Agra only a few days and posing as a Sindhi merchant, he had tried to get an entry into Akbar's assembly. He spent quite a lot on gifts, ajraks and souvenirs in this connection but he had found no glimmer of hope and being utterly dismayed he was planning to return to Multan. Just before he was leaving he thought of visiting a few places of public interest. He was impressed by the new buildings and palaces of Agra. While roaming around, he had entered a garden and relaxed there on a little

platform made of white marble that surrounded a beautiful fountain. Thinking about his failure to achieve what he had come for, he stroked the water with his hands producing small ripples in the pond. Suddenly he had heard quick footsteps of someone and then of another person running. Behind the row of trees he heard someone breathing hard and the other steps too stopped there. "Now tell me where will you hide?" A man spoke in Persian triumphantly.

"Haibat Khan! For God's sake leave me alone." A feminine voice pleaded.

"It is fortunate that I have had a chance at last to be alone with you, I am not letting go of that. Okay, just give me one kiss and I will delightfully and obediently leave," the male voice said.

"For the sake of God, have some shame! If a maid or a eunuch spots us, both of us will be in trouble!" She pleaded.

"I have everything sorted out. No one will dare come here. Look Zeba, I am burning in the fire of love and you do not seem to bother. And you know that on Nauroze we are to be officially engaged." The male voice kept advancing; the movement was followed by rumbling of leaves and a small scream of the female got mixed with the sound.

"Then why can't you wait? Why don't you ask Hazoor Khan Doran for my hand earlier than that?"

"After the Lahore incident, I have come into the eyes of Khan Doran and the King himself, so if I ask for your hand now, I will be turned down. But the good lady, the Queen has promised that she will persuade the King to agree for us to get engaged on Nauroze.'

"Then you must wait until Nauroze...I am not running away. Now leave, please for God's sake, go away. If somebody sees us, both of us will get killed."

"Listen Zeba, I cannot wait any longer. I have arranged everything; my men are waiting with two horses. You come with me and we will go somewhere, to some remote region where we shall be safe from Khan Doran or the King's men. Come my love..."

"Haibat Khan, look..., if you come near me I shall scream..., here....., get away...Oh God!"

Hearing her scream the male voice laughed, "Shout as much as you can....., there is no one in the palace at the moment, and if there are, they are my men! Come....."

The female scream was louder now and reached Dadan's ears, he could not stop himself. He knew that by mistake he had entered the garden of some mansion and exposing himself might get him killed but the woman's scream made him come out and show his presence. He went through the oak trees, and reached the place where the sounds were coming from. A robust Moghul was holding a pretty woman's hand

ECHO IS THE CALL

behind her back and was trying to kiss her. He was stunned to see Dadan and letting go of the girl, he drew his sword.

"Who are you? Rascal. Looks like you want to die....."Haibat Khan shouted.

"I am a traveller and the screams brought me here...."Dadan's reply was brief.

"Leave at once or....."

"I will leave but you have to let her go", Dadan said in fluent Persian.

"Now I know, Zeba, why you have been keeping a distance from me. You have already chosen a lover and that too a foreigner.....", he was shaking in anger and he raised his sword. "If I do not send your lover to hell, my name would not be Haibat Khan!" Saying this he attacked Daadan.

Dadan quickly moved away, Haibat Khan kept attacking but every time Dadan was quickly out of harm's way. From the oak tree, they came towards the fountain. Unable to get a successful stroke of his sword, Haibat Khan was mad with rage and kept his onslaught going. The girl was pale with fear and sympathetically watched the innocent traveller going into the clutches of doom. Haibat Khan was one of the best fighters of Akbar's league. They had grown together and his skill with sword and spear was known

in the region. She was feeling guilty because this man was going to die because of her.

Dadan took cover in the platform near the fountain and Haibat Khan thought now he was cornered, and attacked with all his might. The sword landed on the platform missing Dadan, pieces of stone tore from the ceramic and splattered on the floor. That moment Dadan took his foot forward and hit the inattentive Haibat Khan who fell in the water. Dadan quickly snatched the sword from him.

Haibat Khan was scared as Dadan held the sword, and he quickly came out of the water and started running. Looking at his flight the girl laughed and came to Dadan.

Dadan looked at the sword. Its handle was beautifully carved with gold and silver. He shivered; had the Sindhis possessed these quality swords, the Tarkhans would have packed up for Kandhar long time back. The shadow of the girl brought him out of his imaginations, and he held the sword in his hand, and said, "May I present this beautiful sword to you, I have no need of this."

The girl kept looking at him. She observed his eyes; it looked like something sad was written all over his face, which had given this man a novel and a macho image. Zeba had seen many handsome looking young Moghuls but she had never seen the simplicity

that this man had. She felt like cupping his face in her hands so she could wash away that pain. But she kept the thoughts to herself and said, "Swords look good in brave mens' hands! This sword will suit you better."

"I do not wish to draw the attention of the Moghul soldiers by keeping this sword. I am a voyager, what will I do with the sword. Thank you and I beg your leave now'." He said while turning to leave.

The girl saw him turn and held his arm, "Traveller! You have indeed done a huge favour to me; tell me how can I reward you?"

Dadan looked towards her. Looking at a Moghul beauty with an Indian touch was a gift in itself. Beautiful eyes, lips like the petals of a rose and a perfect bosom, but the idea of even imagining about a woman was miles away from his mind. He laughed and said, "If a favour is done for a reward, how could it be called a favour? And in fact I have done no favour, I feel guilty myself of entering a royal garden considering it a public place."

"No, No, it is not your fault. There were no guards at the entrance. The security people and the maids have all gone to celebrate the birthday of the prince... I was afraid to bump into Hainbat Khan so I chose not to go. And when he knew I was here, he came here."

Dadan thought for a moment and said, "If you would not mind, could I ask who you are and who owns this palace."

"I am Zeba Khanum. His Lordship Khan Doran Nawab Mujahid Khan is my father. This palace has been gifted to my mother and me."

Dadan pondered over the information. She was the daughter of the reigning supreme commander of the armed forces and supposedly the right hand man of King Akbar, a man the King never refuses anything.

"Stranger, what are you thinking?" She asked politely.

"You have offered me a reward, I do not long for any riches but you can return the favour in a way."

She was delighted and she said to herself: "Stranger, I do not know why I have started liking you. If you wish I can sacrifice my life for you", but instead said to Dadan, "What ever you ask for."

"Just one meeting with Hazoor Khan Doran!"

"Is that all?" She was surprised but out of curiosity she continued, "But what for?"

"Oh! Just like that really. I have heard that he is very good at heart and that he has love for the mankind and hates cruelty. It would be my good fortune to meet a man like him." He kept his real

reason to himself.

"But who are you? Your dress and appearance tells me you are from a far away country. Stranger, trust me so I can trust you." She looked him in his eyes, but his heart and mind seemed elsewhere.

"What do you mean by trusting me?" He asked.

"You see, Hazoor Khan Doran has many enemies." She said slowly, "the royal circles are full of jealous people. I do not want to talk to him without getting some information, could you tell me a bit more about yourself." Zeba was watching his reactions.

Dadan appeared to be in deep thoughts, and all his love and emotions were poured in the form of words, "I am from a place where a golden river flows, where the land grows gold, whose people not only love each other but even love their animals like their cows, horses and camels, because they are not familiar with any other feelings except love. These loving and hardworking people have since been slaved by Arghuns and Tarkhans from Kandhar, which has had such an effect that they have started to know what hatred is. They never knew that one human being could be cruel to another but these Arghuns and Tarkhans have set examples in front of them that they might indulge in the times to come. Before all that happens, I want to alert the Mughal Empire and persuade them to help the people of my country to get

rid of the bonds of slavery...”

His voice flowed with emotions like the whole world was his audience, whom he was trying to persuade. The thought of Sindh, its land and its people brought a new sort of spark in his eyes that had welled up with tears.

Zeba had not been ready for this. The stranger’s speech put her into a trance and she prayed that he continued his story so she could hear and see him for long. And then she could get him to occupy a decorated place where she could sit near his feet and listen to his endless story; she could live eternally listening to him. But the story stopped and she noticed the pain in the eyes of the stranger had grown immense.

“Where is that land of loving people?” She smiled and asked.

“Far far away, beyond the skies there...and the name of that country is Sindh...” Dadan said returning the smile.

“And you say the people of that country know nothing but love. I have only seen one man from there....., I wonder how much he knows about love,” she said with a naughty smile on her lips.

“Fighting against the atrocities, he has forgotten everything...” He replied.

Zeba did not want to see the hurt in his eyes, so she said seriously, "I shall talk to Hazoor Khan Doran tonight; you can come and meet me here same time tomorrow..., the guards will not stop you."

Dadan looked at her. Her eyes had a new depth in them and he liked them very much, he felt a desire to touch and feel those beautiful eyes.

Suddenly there was a noise of 3-4 people running in their direction diverting both their attention. Haibat Khan was accompanied by three of his men and was heading their way. Zeba panicked and quickly held Dadan's arm and pleaded, "I will try and stop them. You should slip away from here now!" She was shivering and her voice had changed.

Dadan held her shoulders with his hands and said, "Khanum, do not worry about me. If you are with me, I hardly care even if Haibat Khan had all his men with him."

"But how can you fight them, they are known to be very brutal." She had not finished when she heard Haibat Khan's shout, "Arrest this rascal."

While Haibat Khan stood at a distance, his men came forward with their drawn swords. Dadan blurted out, "Haibat Khan, bravery requires a man to man fight, had you chosen to fight, that would have been different but why did you have to bring these paid

donkeys!"

Brushing Zeba behind him, Dadan came forward and presented the sword with both hands as if he was surrendering. Zeba looked at him with surprise and fright. Looking at his surrender, the three Moghuls looked towards Haibat Khan, who ordered, "Tie him up and take him with you, I will punish him myself."

The sentries put their swords back into their sheaths and approached to hold Dadan. Right then Dadan let go of the sword and raising his hands held both the sentries by their throats and brought them close to each other. He banged their heads against each other so hard that both blacked out after a loud scream that echoed through the garden. The third sentry was too stunned to react before Dadan held him by his waistband and threw him on Haibat Khan. Haibat Khan tried to move away but the sentry landed on him right on his chest. He fell on all fours. With the fall, his temple hit the ground and he was shocked. Dadan picked up the sword and slowly came to him. He pointed the sword at his throat and said, "Haibat Khan, I hate spilling another human being's blood but if you do anything childish this sword will pierce your throat. Now..., get up and get lost..., I do not wish to see your ugly face again....." Dadan spoke calmly.

Zeba saw all of this with astonishment, she could not believe her eyes; the way he had lifted the Moghul sentry was like a child's play to him. She had,

at numerous occasions, seen Moghul wrestlers and fighters perform but they had nothing to match this man. When Dadan returned to her, she had a new loving feeling for him, and she wanted to disappear in his embrace but she shyed away.

“If all the men of your country are like you, stranger, even the Moghul Empire cannot enslave them!” Is what she wanted to say but remained quiet. She tried to find something in his eyes. Dadan had never looked into a woman’s eyes like this and he felt he was getting carried away. He laughed and said, “For Heavens’sake, stop looking at me like that or I shall faint!” It was now Zeba’s turn to laugh. Haibat Khan had run away so she accompanied him to the door and said, “Stranger, I shall wait for you at breakfast. My maid will show you the way. And in the morning I shall tell you about the meeting with Hazoor Khan Doran.”

“What ever you say...!”Dadan said.

“Look after yourself...., Haibat Khan is a very nasty man”, Zeba warned him as he left.

Dadan made quite some ground before he looked back. He saw Zeba waving at him and he waved back and left. He roamed purposelessly for a long time as he felt uneasy in himself. He had never had such feelings and he wondered if he had, like in stories, given his heart away? But for him the question

of love was impossible, he had only one love....., Sindh....Sindh! He had neither the time nor a wish to love anyone else! Until Sindh was free, his heart and soul were not ready to wander around.

He went to his hotel and ordered dinner. The owner was rather surprised to see that he was still around. He had left the hotel that morning saying that he was returning to Sindh. After the meal, he proceeded to his room. A thought came to him and he put the pillow on the bed and covered it up with a sheet. He covered himself with a dark shawl after extinguishing the lamp and sat on the floor in a corner of the room. He remembered Zeba with all her sweetness and he was dreaming with a new feeling that was so tender and heart warming. He closed his eyes and let his feelings run through him.

He must have spent quite some time thinking about Zeba when he heard a sound behind the door. He stood up. Sitting in the dark for so long had made his eyes adapt to the darkness and he saw a person who slowly tiptoed towards his bed. Then suddenly the man raised his hand, the sharp knife in his hand shone for a second and then landed in the pillow on the bed. Right at that moment Dadan came behind the man and held him by his neck with one hand while his other hand covered the man's mouth. The intruder could not comprehend what had happened, he left the dagger and with both his hands tried to fend Dadan's

hand off his mouth. But that grip became stronger and eventually the man stopped struggling and went limp in Dadan's arms. He put him on the bed and getting a rope from under the bed, and tied him. He then tied a piece of cloth over his mouth and then left him in one corner of the room. Dadan now laid down on the bed and fell asleep.

He was up at dawn. He looked around the room and found his prisoner was awake and was looking at him with utter surprise and fear. He was sure Dadan would now put him to an eternal sleep. Dadan got up, yawned and went to his prisoner with the dagger in his hand. The prisoner shivered and despite his bound mouth he tried to beg for mercy. Dadan smiled and getting near him, released him after cutting the rope. After freeing him, Dadan said, "I have not yet decided to kill a Moghul so I let you live. Convey my greetings to Haibat Khan but if I ever see your face again, I shall not forgive you. Now go and get lost before I change my mind."

The surprised prisoner kept staring at him and did not move from where he was. Dadan laughed, "You probably do not believe you are still alive. Come on man, get out of here, and remember your meeting with this Sindhi."

Still surprised the man retreated and ran away.

After the sun was out Dadan got ready, and

getting a horse from the owner of the hotel, he headed towards Zeba's mansion. He was greeted at the door by a guard who took his horse. He dismounted and escorted by another guard he entered the mansion. After walking a distance, the guard stopped and asked him to proceed. The fragrance of the fresh flowers of the garden was refreshing; and he arrived at the entrance to the house. A maid was waiting for him, who bowed and said, "Khanum has been waiting for you."

He entered the house with the maid on his side. The beauty of the palace overwhelmed him. At numerous places there were small beautiful platforms made of red and maroon gypsum that carried beautiful figurines and masterpieces of sculpture. Every idol had a musical organ in its hand that seemed to be playing musical notes forever. He entered the house admiring the beauty around him. After seeing the beauty and riches, he believed all the stories he had learnt about the wealth the Moghuls had. The room he entered had a thick furry carpet and he felt his shoe dipping into the carpet as he walked. The chandeliers on the ceiling had numerous beads of yellow, red, green and white colors that shone with the light. In the center of the room lay a round table containing bowls of fruit of various kinds, from coconuts to grapes; all these fruits gave a strange hue to the beads of the chandeliers. The table was large enough to serve food to 15 to 20 persons. Behind the table was a raised area covered

with a beautiful rug and numerous round pillows with silken covers were arranged in a very artistic manner. The wall facing it had a lion's stuffed head fixed on it. And on both sides of it hung gold plated sheathed swords, knives, axes and daggers that gave a special look to the room. Dadan was busy in admiring the craftsmanship when the maid signalled him to be seated, "You please sit and I will announce your arrival to Khanum." She left through a smaller door.

Dadan sat in a corner on the raised platform. It felt like the floor was made of velvet instead of stone or wood. He got so engrossed in the rich atmosphere of the Moghul living room that he did not notice Zeba who was standing behind him. Zeba observed him with interest. One moment she felt like holding his face and look up into his eyes for a place where she could dwell forever. How innocent was this man! She thought. His presence among the Moghul world was like that of a pious saint in a crowd of crooks and evil men. She wanted to keep looking at him while he explored his dreams silently and planned to change the world. She wanted days, weeks, months and even years to just pass in that state but she could not hide her emotions and she sighed. Dadan woke up from his dreaming state and looking at her, muttered, "Oh, you...."

Zeba's eyes did not show the fear and confusion of yesterday. Instead there was the feeling of thirst as if

she had seen a mirage, and wanted to quench that thirst. Looking at her eyes, Dadan had a strange feeling, he wanted to keep looking into those eyes forever. His looks brought a new colour to her eyes that caused her face to light up and finding no way out of his keen eyes, she tried to hide her smile by touching her fingers to her lips.

"Oh..., why have you stood up?" She could not hide her smile, Dadan sat down. Zeba remembered something and enquired, "Did everything go well last night?"

A smile appeared on Dadan's face and he said, "Haibat Khan had sent one of his scoundrels last night, but the poor rascal was so sleep deprived, he slept all night in my room and left this morning after obediently bowing his head."

"You are smiling, and I could not sleep for one second worrying about you." Her eyes showed concern.

"How will I ever repay that debt?" Dadan smiled and said, "what are my orders so?"

Zeba's eyes now reflected her feelings as if she wanted to say, "Stranger, I thought that I had captured your heart but it seems your heart still beats for only your country" but instead said loudly, "I told Hazoor Khan Doran all about you and he has promised he will

have you present your case in front of His Excellency. In fact he is expecting you at the royal palace.'

"Really! How will I return such a huge favour?" Dadan was unable to believe her words. His mind had thoughts of Sindh, its land and the innumerable brutalities of Tarkhans on its subjects. Zeba saw those shadows of gloom in Dadan's eyes and in order to cheer him, she said, "Do not be sad, something happens to me when you are sad." On uttering these words she blushed and her cheeks went pink from embarrassment. Dadan saw her as someone who now shared his feelings but thought about the effect if she knew what was going through his mind and his other Sindhi brethren. How would she feel then? He rose and said, "I am ready to appear before His Majesty."

"Wait please, breakfast..." Zeba wanted to say something but Dadan interrupted her, "Please do not be annoyed but until," he stopped. He did not want to hurt Zeba. He had sworn not to eat with any foreigner until Sindh was freed. Zeba understood and to save him from embarrassment, she said, "Two guards from the royal regiment will escort you..., but promise one thing....." She fell quiet. Finding the right words can be difficult at times; her feelings overwhelmed her.

"Go ahead please, just order...."

"No, no, it is not an order, it is rather a plea. If

possible, do visit here before you leave." She said that very quickly and the hesitation in her voice charmed Dadan. He felt like holding her in his arms and tell her that his heart would not be happy without seeing her but Zeba did not give him a chance and quickly left the room in order to keep the storm of emotions welling up in her heart to herself. Dadan was left with surprise still looking at the moving curtain from where she had disappeared. He could not believe she was gone. In a moment a maid entered the room and said, "The royal guards await you sire."

He came out with the maid. Two soldiers on horses were waiting for him. His horse was ready; he mounted and started riding with them. After quite a while Dadan realized that they had reached the outskirts of the city. He wondered, his sixth sense warned him; Zeba had said that Khan Doran was waiting for him in the royal palace. What was he doing outside the city?! Finally he could not hold himself and asked one of the soldiers, "How far have we to go?"

A wry smile lined the face of the soldier and he said, "We are almost there."

Dadan's doubts were confirmed and he suddenly pulled the reins bringing the horse to a halt. He could not get it though. Why would Zeba cheat him? What could be her motive? He was still thinking when he saw other soldiers appearing from all directions, from behind the trees and ditches. Very

soon he was totally surrounded by soldiers who were moving towards him. He looked at his bearings and rode with full speed in one direction. Quite a few soldiers followed him and a couple of soldiers came from the front with their swords drawn. When they came near him, he took one foot out of the stirrup and leered on one side of the horse. Almost in that position he rode quickly through them; when he was almost in attacking range, he jumped back up on the saddle and kept banging the stirrup iron on the horse's side and kept riding straight. The entire group of soldiers was following him, he could not find a way out while about 30 riders were closing on him. He was not worried about dying but he was angry with himself of being foolish to believe a woman and distracted from his cause. Back in Sindh who knew what was going on. The riders closed in and he increased his speed. He had no plan, if he confronted them they would cut him to pieces, if he surrendered it was clear that the men had orders not to let him live. He saw a few houses in front of him. A few men had bamboo sticks in their hands and they were making a temporary hut with leaves and bamboo shoots. The men stood still on seeing the approaching horses. Dadan had a look on the bamboo sticks and the hand made sheets of leaves on the floor. Two poles of bamboo had been erected already, so he rode to one of them and pulled it out. Now he had a weapon and he turned the horse back towards the riders. Holding the pole between his wrist and waist he launched his first attack. The pole was quite sturdy and

thick; the first blow threw the Moghul off his horse and got trampled by the oncoming horses. The horses panicked on this sudden onslaught. When he attacked the next soldier, the horses went up on their front feet throwing their riders off in the process. There was panic all around, Dadan rode away from the men and attacked from a distance, enough to avoid getting hit by their spears. After about ten such rounds Dadan realized that they were far too many and were surrounding him again. He halted the horse and started turning round and round with his weapon hurling in a circular fashion. The riders avoided the blows, even though they would not be fatally hit but there was this ever present danger of being trampled by the horses.

The sound of the horses and the screams of soldiers drew the attention of the villagers who came running to them. They were delighted to see one man singlehandedly face so many Moghuls. But Dadan thought the horse might fall from dizziness and he planned his next move. His arm was numb from holding such a heavy pole for so long. When he saw the soldiers circling him once again, he turned the horse towards the houses; the riders avoided the pole in his hand and he galloped through them, but he was being followed any way. When he reached near a house, he held the pole firm and suddenly digging it in the ground he leapt from the horse and jumped onto one of the roofs. The soldiers were astonished with his

acrobatics, while within minutes Dadan crossed roof after roof and disappeared.

He stopped on a roof and got his breath and looked around. Gradually the crowd of people and the soldiers waned away; he finally came to the last roof where on the right he saw an alley with a mosque at its far end. He drank some water from the pond there, washed his face and hands and went to sit on the entrance of a room. He was exhausted and his body ached, especially his arm. After offering his prayers, he came out of the mosque and proceeded to a nearby motel. He had a meal and he talked to the owner and asked for a horse. He heard that the soldiers had not gone away and had reported to the town administrator. He gave the motel manager some cash for the horse and went back to the mosque. Returning during the day could be perilous, so he waited for nightfall.

After the evening prayers, he started for the city and entered it when it was dark. The evening breeze and the horse's trot made him sleepy but he chose to head for Zeba's palace rather than a hotel. The guards were surprised to see him alive and one of them held the reins of his horse and said, "Thank God you are alive!"

"Why what happened?" Dadan behaved as if he was unaware of the circumstances.

Hazoor Khan Doran has sent his men all around looking for you, since he came to know of the conspiracy, anyone who meets him comes out praying for his life!"The guard was obviously scared.

"Oh! But who told him?"He asked.

"The two guards who had been sent for you got severely injured by Haibat Khan's men, and were left there in a ditch considering them dead. They substituted two of their men who took you away. Someone spotted the injured men and brought them to Hazoor Khan Doran, they told him all about it..., the rest is known to you!"

"Ah!"Dadan exclaimed as if he remembered something. He felt ashamed and embarrassed of suspecting Zeba's intentions. He also wondered how Zeba must have felt about all of this.

He was escorted by the guards to the entrance. When the maid saw him, she was amazed and she brought him in and got him seated. Arriving in the comforts of a room, suddenly his sleepy eyes felt heavy and his body just gave itself away to the softness of the velvety pillows and he fell asleep.

When Zeba came to the room, she was very casually dressed. The way she headed towards Dadan, it looked like she had finally found her beloved after years. She raised her arms and wanted to greet and welcome him..., but when she saw her guest in deep

sleep, she just came and stood near him. The smile on her face was accompanied by love for this stranger; how tired he must be! She wanted to take his pillow and put his head in her lap and keep looking at him forever, but she could not do that so she just stared. How peaceful was his expression, as if smiling in his sleep. She prayed for that smile to belong only to her; she wanted to feel that smile so she brought her hand to his lips. Her touch made the smile to spread all over his face. The feeling of the sharp hair of his moustache sent a shiver down her spine, she felt dizzy. She wanted to stretch her arms to relax but knowing what she felt in her chest made her shy. She suddenly had so many wishes she wanted fulfilled. She wanted to say, "O Stranger! What have you done to me, I cannot rest and sleep has taken leave of me!"

She kept thinking and hoping about her future, framing different scenarios when Dadan suddenly woke up like he had seen a bad dream; when he saw Zeba looking at him with so much love, he too felt tender for her. There could be no explanation of such feelings and he took Zeba's hand in his and said, "I am a traveller from afar, please do not look at me like that, lest I forget where I came from!"

"I wish that was possible." She smiled but for some unknown reason tears flowed from her eyes and made their way through her cheeks to get absorbed in her shirt. Looking at her tears Dadan got perturbed and asked, "Why these tears..."

"O Stranger, I have every happiness and comfort at my disposal. I do not know why but since I have seen you, every joy seems superficial and unreal, I am not sure what spell you have cast on me that I have become so shameless that I come out with my heart out for you. I am the daughter of a Moghul noble, I can get whatever I want. But just at the moment I am just a maid for you, a slave that you now own; whatever you do but do not keep me away from yourself."

Dadan was confused. He wondered if he had actually heard these words or were these Zeba's feelings that his heart had read; and moments later he found Zeba sobbing in his embrace. The front of his shirt was wet with her tears and her fragrance travelled from her lips to his to get embedded in his soul. He took a deep breath to capture this fragrance forever in his heart. For hours they remained absorbed in each other. Then they heard a voice behind them that brought them back to reality. They separated and turned back. Dadan saw a tall Moghul with a large forehead and a thin moustache approaching him. His face exuded a wisdom not seen in most men. His expression was such that it was hard to tell whether it was from happiness, resentment or just warning. Having noticed him, he stood at some distance from Zeba.

"Foreigner, I had only heard about your bravery but today I have seen it."

Dadan was not sure whether he meant it or was taunting him; he could not answer. Zeba was visibly scared and stood with her head bowed. She kept glancing towards the door and she was ready to run out, given a chance.

"Do you know the punishment for showing love so openly with a Moghul princess?"

Dadan was yet again unsure whether it was a reprimand or else but this time he replied, "I shall accept any punishment that is due, sire."

"Any punishment?" The Moghul said rather firmly.

"Yes sir..., any punishment!" Dadan's words and expression made it clear that he had felt the hint in the Moghul's remark.

"Then you get ready for that punishment." The Moghul's voice was stern but was devoid of any anger.

"I await your order, sir," Dadan said a bit carefully.

"Your punishment is that you be wedded to Zeba immediately."

Out of shyness Zeba's face reddened and she ran towards the door and left the room. Dadan was bewildered. His feelings overwhelmed him and hesitantly he said, "But...."

Mujahid Khan came forward and put his hand on Dadan's shoulder and said, "Sindhi, I am so impressed with your bravery and valiance that I feel honoured to give my daughter in wedlock to you.'

A tornado of thoughts sped in Dadan's mind. He was on such a crossroad that he was unable to decide the course he should take. He remembered that dream when his motherland Sindh had begged him her freedom. On the other side were Zeba and her love and companionship he considered so close to his heart. Suddenly from nowhere, Akhund Noor Muhammad's face came to his mind like a bonfire, and he felt in his ears, "You had sworn Dadan, that until Sindh is not freed, you will not marry." And Dadan's burning heart responded, "No sir, I am very grateful but that is absolutely impossible.'

Mujahid Khan's face tightened and one of his eyebrow twitched, but controlling himself he asked, "What do you mean?"

"Do not get me wrong sir, Zeba is now a part of my life and I would be honoured to get her, but....."

"But what?"

"I have sworn that I will not marry until my motherland is not free....."

Mujahid Khan's face had a new colour on it now. His feeling of love and sincerity for Dadan had

now respect added to it; he came forward and holding his arm he said, "praise be upon you young man, thousands of praises! On your love of your land, on your emotions....., but if we wait for that, Zeba will probably end up living alone for the rest of her life", Mujahid Khan smiled over the thought of that.

Dadan kept quiet for a moment but then he got a new vigour, a spark in his eyes that shone like a diamond and he said, "Don't say that, sir. Sindhis have risen, the grandeur of the Sindhu River (Indus) runs through their hearts, and that time is not far when the boulders of slavery will be smashed by Sindhis, even if the Moghuls do not come to our help....."

"But why should we..., or the Emperor would help the Sindhis? Starting trouble with Tarkhan territory without a reason does not seem to be wise. In addition to that, the Tarkhans have shown a desire to announce their allegiance to the Emperor." Mujahid Khan sat down and indicated Dadan to take a seat.

"Sindhis have a special right on the Emperor. When Humayun had come to Sindh in a helpless state, Sindhis had welcomed him as a guest and provided him with all the comforts. Arghuns and Tarkhans had not let him have one night of peaceful sleep. They were after his blood and conspired against him day in and day out, while the Sindhis served him and his men, provided them food and shelter, gave him boats, grain and hay for their horses, they even gave their lives for

him. After that the biggest right they have is on Akbar, who was born in Sindh, so in a way he belongs there. If monarchical approach restrains him from honouring Sindh, that is a separate issue. But the first sound that he ever heard was from the breeze of Sindh, the midwife who assisted his birth process was a motherly figure from Sindh; the preacher who announced the first call of God in his ears was a Sindhi. The land that gave shelter to the Emperor of India in addition to the warmth of emotions, at a time when Arghuns and Tarkhans were after his blood....., has that land no right on Akbar?!"

Mujahid Khan looked at him in awe, and when he saw a flood of tears behind the shining eyes of Dadan, the heart of the Moghul noble melted. He pressed on his shoulder and said, "I wish the Emperor would have heard your speech! I am sure he would have immediately ordered his troops to attack the Tarkhans. I shall never be able to articulate these thoughts like you did. But I assure you that the Emperor has already given me a decree, and in a month's time Sindh will not be ruled by Arghuns and Tarkhans but its own indigenous Sindhis. With the help of Sindhi rebels, it should not be difficult to uproot the Tarkhans. When I accomplish that goal, in addition to an order of freedom of Sindh, I shall give you another gift there. But remember, if my Zeba has a complaint from you....., then you must remember that my name is Mujahid Khan...!"

The burning heart of Dadan cooled down and eased instantly and he looked at Mujahid Khan with gratitude. He imagined the picture of a free Sindh....., but somehow he felt something amiss, as if the picture was incomplete despite all the paints used. Perhaps Sindh had been enslaved for so long that imagining its freedom seemed unbelievable! Perhaps that was the case, he thought. He buried his thoughts and concerns in a corner of his heart and smiled, he said, "Zeba is nearer than my breath to me. Sir, I wish that day is not far when I too can boast about my country." For some reason, there was sarcasm in his tone.

Mujahid Khan could not get his sarcasm and said, "That time is not too far. You go to Sindh and inform your rebel friends that Mujahid Khan is on his way like a tornado to free them from their slavery..., but be careful about Haibat Khan. I have heard that he has ordered a few of his thugs to look out for you.... My men will escort you to a safe point. When do you intend to start your journey?"

"Today, thank you very much. I do not need your soldiers, I can deal with Haibat Khan's thugs myself...."Dadan reassured him.

"Okay then, God be with you,"Mujahid Khan said and left the room.

Dadan started for the door to leave when Zeba

entered, her eyes shone with a new hope; she had heard each word of their conversation and she just stood near Dadan with her lowered gaze. Dadan felt for her and his hurt on leaving her, a pain that was of a different kind. He wanted to say, "Zeba, my love, the call of my nation had compelled me to leave but my heart will remain with you here!" He was about to say these words when Zeba put her finger on his lips.

She said, "I know everything. God be with you....., but never ever forget me...." She burst into tears so Dadan held her tightly in his embrace, and for a long time kept comforting and reassuring her. And when he finally left, there was amidst all her tears, a smile.

11

Laila made Sanghaar forget Sindh. In her embrace, he no longer knew where he was. When Surhayo Mirbahar had opened the door of King Tamachi's rest house at Keenjhar Lake for his friend, he had difficulty recognizing his old mate. The expression on his face did not belong to this warrior who had always been solid as a rock. He felt Sanghaar was trying to remember something and his insistence caused Sanghaar to stay in his hut. He started forgetting everything. Bhagul who he was so fond of, was hidden like a statue in his memories. Since he had brought Laila with him, he only remembered that Mirza Baqi had escaped from his hands and he had been unable to avenge Akhund Saleh and the people of Thatta. This defeat had crushed his soul to bits. He had become self-destructive and to escape these feelings, he comforted himself by taking pleasure in Laila's body. The whirlpool was drawing him deeper and deeper by the day, the colours of rainbow of Laila's love blinded his eyes.

Laila too kept trying to find something in him; in his eyes, face, his hairy chest... Somehow she ended up only sighing. Despite not finding what she wanted,

she persevered and did not want to let go of that curiosity in her. She would repeatedly look into his eyes hoping to find what she wanted. Despite not getting it, she did not abandon her quest; she did not want to lose him and so she never let him away from her. She thought if she left the house, he would never come back. She always kept pleading to him on one pretext or the other to keep him indoors. Whenever Surhayo came to call upon Sanghaar, she would become anxious and plead for him not to go out. She believed if he met Surhayo, he might remember Sindh, or Mirza Baqi or the fate of Akhund Saleh..., she had done everything to erase these bitter memories from his mind.

She had another apprehension and that was about Ameer Khan's men, because there were many small contingents of Tarkhan soldiers in the area. In addition, one group of soldiers visited the lake area almost every day to collect taxes from the fishermen. The sound of their horses gave her palpitations. Once she kept awake for almost the whole week to keep an eye on any visitors. On the contrary Sanghaar's eyes were always sleepy and she witnessed a severe pain behind them. She wanted to caress his eyes and take away all the pain. She wondered about the difference in peoples' eyes, these ones were full of hurt and pain. She touched them frequently to feel the anguish of this man. And her touch gave her a chill that reminded her of the snow covered mountains of her homeland. She

used to become stiff and she would tremble and hide in Sanghaar's warm embrace and sleep like a child.

At dawn when the boats sailed sleepily on the waves of Keenjhar, Laila always thought that someone was coming, and every such time and on every sound she hugged Sanghaar ever so tightly. It had been eight days since their arrival and gradually her fear of Ameer Khan's arrival was fading away. She had been thinking about accepting the offer of Surhayo for a walk on the banks of Keenjhar and a boat trip with Sanghaar on her side. She thought of letting her hair get wet in the water and enjoy the cool breeze over the lake. But that day instead of Surhayo's call, she heard the sounds of horses from some distance. The sounds got nearer and her heart raced. She tried to sleep pretending she had not heard the noises but when the sounds came from very close, she decided to wake Sanghaar up. He was in deep sleep and did not want to wake up; by habit he tried to pull Laila close to him but Laila whispered in his ear, "Khan, I think Ameer Khan has arrived here."

Startled, he sat up. Right then there was a knock on the door. Sanghaar's eyes suddenly shone and a new vigour replaced the laziness he had been having all this time. Laila knew he remembered everything and she saw that smile return to his face. There was another knock on the door. Sanghaar stretched and picked up his sword. He lifted Laila's chin with his

hand and staring into her eyes, he said, "If I live, I shall defeat Ameer Khan and crossing all the Arghuns and Tarkhans will come and take you away but if I perish, do not put any blame on a dead man." Hearing these words, Laila hugged him and burst into tears.

With the sword in his hand he approached the door. He knew from the sounds of the hoovthat Ameer Khan had come with a large force; he looked around and noticed that the Tarkhans had no option but break the only door. The walls of the building were too high for any Tarkhan to endeavour climbing it. On the back was the lake. He had a way open for him ands of the horses that was to climb the roof and jump into the lake and if he was lucky, one of the fishermen might come to his help. But he considered what Laila would think that he left her and ran away. This thought nullified his plans to escape. He sort of knew Ameer Khan's mind as well, and he was sure if he traded Laila for his release, Ameer Khan would be only too happy with the deal. But that thought was so appalling and embarrassing, he did not even consider it. He had only one way that he fights and if he gets hold of a horse, he might break their circle and escape from there.

He stood by the door and waited for it to break. The Tarkhan soldiers got hold of a big log of wood and banged it against the door. After a few blows the door gave way, making 5-6 soldiers fall on the door. Other soldiers followed them with their drawn swords.

Sanghaar's sword sliced through the back of one and the thigh of another soldier, both of them fell on the floor screaming. He took the sword from the fallen soldier and tried to come out while fighting them. Tarkhans came in hordes like they were here to fight an army. Stopping them was impossible so he tried to get out in the open through the door. Sanghaar's sword was moving with such a speed that many Tarkhans fell, only to be replaced by more men. One of them got such a forceful blow that he was cut into two pieces. Seeing his fate, the other Tarkhans started retreating and Sanghaar was able to come out in the open. But once he was there, he realized that was a deadly mistake. A group of riders with spears started approaching towards him but before he could plan his next move, a noose made of thick rope got around his shoulders. With a jerk of the rope he lost his balance. His sword fell. He tried to get up but the Tarkhan holding the rope jerked it hard making him fall again. The soldiers were enjoying their colleague pulling the rope and Sanghaar falling over and over again. The man holding the rope looked at Ameer Khan and pulled the rope so Sanghaar was grating against the ground hitting stones and rocks. He knew that instant that Ameer Khan had chosen this way to kill him. Tarkhan soldier backed his horse and pulled the rope yet again. The rope was tight on his chest and he felt the hair on his chest being pulled, a stone cut his lower lip and he felt the sour taste of blood in his mouth. For

a moment he became stiff and before the rider could pull the rope again, he held the rope with both his hands and taking a deep breath he pulled at the rope with all his force. The rider was not ready for this and fell over the horse's neck and landed on the ground. He lost control of the rope; Sanghaar quickly held the rope and loosened the noose releasing him from it. The Tarkhans were not enjoying the scene now. Within seconds he circled the rope above his head and threw it towards Ameer Khan. It landed and encircled the waist of Ameer Khan who fell from his horse. Right at that moment a spear went through Sanghaar's shoulder and he fell on the rocks. Tarkhan soldiers were now all around him with their spears pointed at him. One of the soldiers released Ameer Khan from the rope. Ameer Khan slowly walked and came to stand near Sanghaar. His eyes were on fire; he bent and pulled the spear out of Sanghaar's shoulder. He signalled his men and returned to his horse. Tarkhan soldiers tied him up with ropes and pushing him ahead entered the house.

Ameer Khan locked the door from inside after he entered the house and kept staring at Laila. Her back was towards the door as she wept in a pillow. Crying made her body shiver in an unusual manner; Ameer Khan felt the whole world shivering with her movements. Laila's hair was spread around her neck and the pillow, and her shoulders were visible from her thin fabric. Ameer Khan kept watching the beauty that emanated from that tender body, he could not

hold himself and gently said, "My love....."

Ameer Khan's words were full of emotions that had such an effect on the weeping girl and she hugged the pillow even more firmly. Ameer Khan opened his waistband and along with his sword hung it on the door handle. He came and stood near her. God! How did you create such beauty? Between her shirt and her neck, her skin looked so beautiful that Ameer Khan put his lips on her neck. Laila's movements stopped at once. She tried to get up but Ameer Khan wrapped his arms firmly around her. His forearms made an arch around her breasts and his hands firmly anchored in her armpits. His lips worked their way from her neck to her back and he was overcome with emotions. Laila wriggled out of his squeeze and stood in front of him. Her eyes brimmed with tears. Ameer Khan had never seen those eyes crying; he had only seen love in them, only belonging and bravery but he had never seen these eyes burn him like a torch. He could not look into her eyes. He felt something deep in him breaking and the pain of that echoed through his body, numbing his mind. Trying to recover from that numbness he spoke, "Love! I am here now...."

Laila did not answer; she just kept staring at him. From the cloud of her tears, hatred exuded from her eyes.

"Love, I will punish this Sindhi in a way that people will remember my revenge....., my love, my

body longs for your embrace forever..."

The haze in laila's eyes cleared and the next moment she pulled out a fine knife from her waistband and pointing it at Ameer Khan, her words burnt him like balls of fire, "Coward, impotent, murderer....., if you come near me, this knife will go through you....., I prefer a Sindhi farmer over hundreds of Tarkhan nobles like you; they are true to their heart, they have love and are brave....., you., you are a dog."

She wanted to say much more but Ameer Khan held her hand which had the knife and twisted her arm behind her. She screamed from pain and the knife fell from her hand. Ameer Khan was mad with rage and he blurted out, "Laila, I do not want to hurt you because you are so beautiful. You insulted me once in front of a Sindhi but this Sindhi will be punished in front of you in a manner you will not dare even calling for a Sindhi....., I swear by your beauty. I would have pierced this very knife through you had I not remembered the days when I had lost mind over your love. Remember that day Laila, when in a row of slaves, you had signalled to me that I could not avoid. And remember all those days when anything you desired was honoured...., I bought and freed your brother and sent him to Turkistan; I had your father released from a prison in Kandhar...., and today..., you Laila, you.....!"

Ameer Khan could not speak, he felt a knot in

his throat and his eyes had tears in them. He remembered the days when despite his status and position, he hated wars, intrigues and cruelty and that he had vowed to spend all his life cherishing the love for Laila and Idraaki. Whenever the insurgencies and revolts by the Sindhis were at their peak and when fighting them he got tired, the comfort of Laila's company used to wash away all the wars and evils of this world. He used to joke with Laila saying that Jihad was a tenet of Islam and the Muslims were right in sacrificing their lives as they were promised houris in heaven who were more beautiful than the Lailas of this world. She used to tease him and say, "Can a houri be prettier than me? And at times when she was angry at him, Ameer Khan would do anything to make her happy. The times then were different, a lot of blood had been shed and now times were different. The blood of Sindhis was like a red carpet that was spread everywhere and that had taken away all his tenderness of love and life of peace. Two unwavering personalities now tortured him even in his dreams;...Sanghaa who had killed his father and Sodhal who had stolen his love.....When they came in his dreams, he saw the corpse of his father hanging from the pole. He saw the frightened and staring eyes of the eunuch Suleman and he used to wake up disturbed.

The thought made him leave Laila's arm and asked her to walk out of the room. Laila observed the hurtful eyes of Ameer Khan and keeping her head low,

she walked out slowly. In front of the cottage, Sanghaa had been tied to a tree with ropes. Some Tarkhan soldiers armed with spears and swords stood guard. Sanghaa's clothes were soaked in blood and clung to his body. The gash in his shoulder was still spurting blood. His appearance was so horrifying that Laila could not move and she collapsed on the ground.

Ameer Khan picked her up in his arms and ordered a sentry to bring some water. He ordered another of his men to bring a red hot rod; when Laila came around she noticed she was reclining at a chair. Ameer Khan's arms were in front of her shoulders while the Tarkhan soldiers looked at her beauty. Ameer Khan felt a sort of satisfaction in having Laila being exposed to common men. Sanghaa was there facing him. A smile came to his face. Sanghaa was soaked in blood but that smile started hurting Laila, she wanted to consume that smile and hold it in her forever. She trembled so much that even Ameer Khan's embrace could not keep her from moving. And then she could not believe what she saw. A Tarkhan soldier brought a red hot rod that he held from its wooden handle and stood near Sanghaa. Ameer Khan tightened his grip on Laila and said, "Sanghaa you had killed my father by hanging him and I had sworn to take revenge but considering a reaction from Sodhal I had postponed the plans. Now I can have you hanged upside down, I can have you crushed by horses or trampled under elephants' feet. I can even cut you into

pieces and feed them to dogs. But the crime you have committed is larger than these punishments. You have separated and stolen my Laila from me, for this you deserve a much severer punishment that is worse than a death penalty. Say what penalty would you choose yourself?"

Sanghaa did not answer; he just kept staring at Laila. He was in a state that Laila avoided his stare and covered her face with her hands. That was when she heard Sanghaa's reply.

"Ameer Khan, I did not hang your father, his crimes led him to his fate. One day or the other, time will tell that whoever commits crimes against Sindh will meet a similar fate. I am not the only Sanghaa in Sindh; there are hundreds of Sanghaas and Sodhals, who will keep hanging the culprits. And you have taken Laila as a slave but for me she is a flower that is so fragrant, her eyes have a special thing that touches one's heart, her soul is as beautiful as her body. The emotions she feels in her heart are alien to you but I understand them well. And lastly about the punishment, you ask yourself; how can a coward like you punish a brave warrior."

"Stop it rascal! I will teach you Sindhis a lesson you will not forget for centuries to come." He signalled to one of his men, who did not think for a second and inserted the hot rod in Sanghaa's eyes one by one and then removed it. The atmosphere smelled of burning

skin. Sanghaar kept silent; where once his eyes were, stood two black holes with charred meat protruding from the sockets. Laila screamed so loudly that Ameer Khan and his men got startled. Laila ran out to Sanghaar and held him in her embrace and burst into tears.

12

Sodhal had been feeling completely lost, spending his days and nights in his cottage and had refused to come out. He just sat there, staring at the pot of white liquor. His eyes had forgotten blinking. Days went by and nights passed into another day, but he just sat there. Elderly Aloo was worried about him, and tried to cheer him up by inventing stories but Sodhal would not blink. He felt lonely....., he had no relations, friends, comrades. He had even forgotten who he was and why was he here. Aloo kept him abreast of all the developments; Mirza Jan Baba's forces had been defeated, fierce fighting continued between his forces and Mirza Baqi's army at Makli, a battle that was led in person by Mirza Baqi; he had won over many Tarkhan nobles by offering them bribes and promising dividends; and had announced to give his daughter's hand in marriage to anyone who brought the head of Mirza Jan Baba. He went to the extent that he announced for any Sindhi or Tarkhan who brings Mirza Jan Baba's head would in addition to his daughter, also receive the mayorship of Bakhar. On the other hand Ameer Khan was raiding places in town trying to capture the rebels, and had gotten hundreds of Sindhis killed even on petty suspicion. There was

not one house where his men had not been to, they had not even spared the Sayyads; there were puddles of blood in Syed Ali Shirazi's neighbourhood. The most intense resistance had been from the students of Thatta, so hundreds of schools had been arsoned and destroyed, hundreds of students had been trampled under elephants' feet. They had dishonoured the teachers, prayer leaders, local *Qazis* (judges) and preachers by shaving their beards and chopping their tongues and throwing them in the river. Wherever they had a suspicion, they entered the homes and put cats in the womens' pajamas. Even these atrocities did not cause Sodhal to blink, he just stared and stared blankly at the white liquor in the glass....., why should he be concerned?! Those Sindhis.....who were they...what were they to him!? What was Sindh!? Zhe seemed not to remember anything.

Many days went by but Sodhal's condition remained unchanged. Despite the cold, his forehead was always drenched with drops of sweat; until one day when Aloo tiptoed into the cottage and tried to get Sodhal's attention even though he would not budge. Aloo persevered and said, "Sodhal, Shah Qasim Arghun had attacked Mirza Baqi, who has escaped by jumping out of the window of his palace!"

Even this news had no effect on Sodhal, so Aloo continued, "Right at that time Sanghaar had also entered the palace but because of darkness he was

unable to kill him. Had Mirza Baqi not jumped out of the window.....”

Sodhal suddenly shook up. “Sanghaar..... Sanghaar..... Where is Sanghaar?”

Aloo was quiet, he was scared of what he saw in Sodhal’s eyes, that were now bloodshot and the expression they exuded was horrifying.

“I asked you a question uncle Aloo! Where is Sanghaar?”

“He took Ameer Khan’s Laila with him, Ameer Khan has gone after him.....”

Sodhal went into a frenzy, his hand squeezed the bronze pot and his body stiffened; the pot broke in his hand injuring him. Blood trickled from his hand and got mixed with the white liquor staining his clothes. Uncle Aloo slowly advanced and said, “Sodhal, you have cut your hand.”

Sodhal stood up; a fire burnt his soul and he grimaced, grinding his teeth he said, “Get my horse ready.”

“A few men have come from town and are saying that if you could lead them, they are ready to sacrifice their lives for Sindh.”

Sodhal repeated, “Uncle, I asked you to saddle the horse.”

The old man stepped outside grumpily and Sodhal followed him. Some 20 odd men were waiting outside and in unison all of them said, "Jiye Sindh."

The sound of that slogan was so sweet, so heart warming, so innocent that tears welled into Sodhal's eyes and from the cloud of tears, he looked at the men and mumbled, "Jiye Sindh.....Jiye Sindh."

"Sodhal, we are with you, Sindh is with you. Sindh is looking for you!" One of the men who appeared to be from some seminary said.

"Sindh, Sindh, Sindh!" He nearly cried saying the words. "Where is Sindh? This, injured and tortured motherland ...Sindh, where vultures scan the lands..., is this Sindh? Is this the Sindh of Dodo? Is this the Sindh of Tamachi? Is this the Sindh of Doolah Daryah Khan..., look there..., the corpse of Sindh burns there, see there..., Thatta is burning!"

He went on saying; Sindh had awakened in him but along with that two pink lips, two uncovered arms and the gorgeous bosom also awakened in his heart.

"Forgive me friends; I am out to fight my own little war, not for Sindh. I am empty, leave me alone. I am trying to resolve my own disputes, please leave me with my troubles." He said all this with a broken heart, each word coming out like a sob.

"We are with you Sodhal."

He did not answer; for a few moments he kept looking at the men. Suddenly he remembered his nephew Sanwal and almost forcing a smile he said, "As you like, I have nowhere to stay or go to, if you want to roam around with me, be my guest."

The elderly Aloo brought another horse along with Sodhal's mare. Sodhal asked, "Who is this other horse for?"

"For me, I know how to cook and I know a bit of Persian... I might be of some use!"

"And this cottage!" A young man asked.

"When Sindh breathes the winds of peace, there will be many cottages; I have earned a lot from Sindh, these old bones might be of some use for it."

Sodhal wanted to ask which way Sanghaar had gone but instead asked, "Which way did Ameer Khan go?"

"Towards Keenjhar." A man answered.

Sodhal came to his mare, and caressed her face and withers; the mare had not seen her master for a few days so she moved her head with Sodhal's movements. He said, "Stupid, I have not died!" The mare twitched her withers from happiness as if it wanted the master to go for a ride. When Sodhal got on the mare, the men followed him.

They reached the woods of Samas in the evening. Their horses were tired and their nostrils and faces were covered with dust. The last few rays of the setting sun reminded the birds of their nests. Aloo advanced his horse and said, "Sodhal, the horses are exhausted and will die if we proceed any further. How about camping here for the night?"

Sodhal's mind worked faster than his mare and had reached Sanghaar, Laila and Ameer Khan. On hearing Aloo's request, he murmured, "whatever the group feels."

Aloo appeared to know the forest inside out, he knew where they could find some plain ground, water and where were they likely to find a prey for hunting. He took the men to a pond and they all dismounted. They kept the horses near the water and Aloo entered the forest with a couple of men. A little while later, one of them had an ibex on his shoulder and the other one had a deer in his arms. They started a fire and started cooking. Four men dispersed around to keep a watch, while the others sat on the ground and started chatting.

At a distance from them, Sodhal sat on a log and kept thinking. Trying to hide what was going on in his mind, he was making shapeless figures on the ground with his knife. And from the figures he thought he saw Laila looking at him. He became restless and stood up again. Putting the knife in his waistband, he erased the figures with his shoe. The men around him looked at

him; this Sodhal was so different from the one they had heard about. Aloo was visibly the most worried about him, he whispered to himself, "Dear God, the man has not slept the whole week, my Lord take care of him.'

When Aloo brought a roasted leg of the ibex to Sodhal, he came back from his dream like state. He looked at Aloo with gratitude and got a smile in return. He had not finished eating when one of the men on the watch came running to him and said, "Sodhal, about 10 to 12 Tarkhans are carrying a palanquin to Thatta."

Sodhal gave the piece of meat to Aloo and stood up. "Who is in the palanquin, did you ask?"

"It is Ameer Khan's mistress, they call her Laila." The man said brething heavily.

Sodhal felt like the forest spun around him. His men, the fire, the roasting meat and the horses, everything spun. He put his hand on his forehead and then scratched his cheek. And then he quickly took his sword and headed towards his mare. His companions stood up too and headed towards their horses. Sodhal did not look at them and said, "I had told you this was my private war. Please, all of you just stay here.'

He was not shouting but his tone was such that the men froze wherever they were. Sodhal did not saddle the mare and whispered to it, "let us go dear."

The mare correctly guessed its master's

thoughts. Without having the reins, it knew where to go and started galloping through the woods. There was something special in its ride like she knew that Sodhal was riding without the saddle. But its speed remained swift. As soon as the mare cleared the woods, Sodhal saw some lighted torches at some distance. Coming out from the darkness of the forest he could easily see the figures of the Tarkhans. He drew his sword and like lightning, he was in the middle of the Tarkhans. His first strike took two Tarkhans down from their horses. The animals panicked and trampling their riders, ran away. Sodhal's sword was on fire and was finding targets like an eagle finds its prey; one of the Tarkhan's sword cut Sodhal's cheek just below his eye and blood trickled from the cut to his lips. Tasting his own blood only furthered his speed and he took out his knife from the waistband. Attacking with both hands now, he was soon over two more Tarkhan soldiers whose screams echoed in the woods. The remaining three or four sentries thought the better of it and rode away.

Sodhal jumped down from the mare. The palanquin was on the ground, the men carrying it had run to save their lives. Sodhal took one of the torches left by them and with a very tired gait approached the palanquin and lifted the curtain.

Laila lay on her side holding resting her head on her arm. Her hair covered her neck and from there hung over her bosom. In the light of the torch, Sodhal

looked at her. Her face brightened up when she saw Sodhal and she smiled. Sodhal's eyes glanced at her bare arms and from there they went to the cleavage of her chest. His gaze did not stop there and travelled down to her navel. He noticed under the navel in her waistband there was a small knife housed in its diamond laced sheath. Sodhal stuck the torch in the ground in front of the palanquin.

Laila looked at him for some time and the smile was followed by a strange change in her expression. She breathed heavily and her breasts heaved up and down with the breathing. Sodhal felt like the earth was shaking. Laila stared at him and said, "my love, I was sure you will find me..., but what took you so long? ... come..., come to me and I will make you forget Sindh."

Sodhal put his index finger on her forehead; he pushed her hair away from there and his finger slid through her nose downwards, when it reached her lips, she kissed it but the finger kept sliding down; from the dimple of her chin, to her neck and then to the cleavage of her breasts. And from there, over her fabric it came down around her navel until it reached the handle of the knife. He stared at Laila and pulled the knife from its sheath.

Laila looked at him expectantly, her arm wanted to embrace him, and to get this brave man relax on her chest. She opened her arms and tried standing up. Sodhal jerked his hand and the blade of the knife

pierced the cleavage of her chest all the way upto the hilt. Laila tried to stop a hiccup by swallowing and tried to keep that smile alive at her face; she held his shirt with both hands and she eventually drifted through his hairy chest and fell in his feet.

Sodhal felt like the spinning world around him suddenly came to a halt. All the storms in his mind came to a stop. The fire inside him had extinguished. He felt like his heart was an empty chamber now and tears filled his eyes. He heard the sound of breathing beside him and he turned around to see that it was the mare that stood there with her head bowed. His tears disappeared and he started caressing the neck of the mare and mumbled, "Let's go dear, my war ends here. Now come, let us wage a war for Sindh.'

Whenever there was a storm in the otherwise quiet and serene river Sindhu, it was of such a force that even Noah's boat would not survive. Vaillages and towns, crops and trees, canals and lakes and almost everything would be covered with frothing waters. From a distance it would appear as if the water was touching the sky at the horizon, pushing the sky farther away. Everywhere people would talk about the water and be it humans or birds, everyone looks out for a new dwelling.

It is said that in such seasons when the Sindhi traders took their merchandise on boats and went on voyages, their women would offer sacrifices to the

river, light up small 'divas' on the water and would pray all day and all night for their return, that was not to happen. The women would return to their homes in the evening from the river bank praying and singing melancholic *Sur Samoondi*. But this season the women instead had a new prayer, a new song that echoed with the waves of the mighty river and reached the hearts of the people. Everyone talked about it. "Did you hear Sodhal is coming!" This became a common question and finally the Tarkhans heard that Sodhal is on his way. The news made the Tarkhans run for their lives and they all were moving to Thatta.

Sodhal was like an ocean that absorbed streams of people from towns, villages and cities from all over Sindh. The ocean swelled, its fierce waves advanced towards their targets. Strange and unthinkable stories were on the lips of the people. The older men and women circled around bonfires and talked about the new occurrences. Every day the story took a new turn, especially one of them took the form of a myth, a superstition that Sodahl was in reality Doolah Daryah Khan who pleaded with his Maker in heavens that my dear motherland Sindh is in the hands of enemies, please permit me to return to earth my land, grant me a new life. The reply was a conditional one, that if he forgoes heaven and accepts a dwelling in hell he would be given a chance. Doolah Daryah Khan had conceded to the condition and gratefully said if he was given a chance to sacrifice his life for Sindh, he was ready for a

thousand hells.

Travelling with Sodhal, his men went around and found that everywhere people were welcoming them. They were provided with food like feast, slaughtered animals, cooked delicious dishes; people danced and rejoiced, they sang their praises and the entire region echoed with slogans of "Jiye Sindh." Any Tarkhan living in the area would pack up and leave when he heard these slogans.

Sodhal and his men were strange, almost looking like ghosts, dust covering their specially trimmed beards, their clothes covered with drops of blood and a shine in their eyes that were always trying to find something. They met people as if they had never seen each other for years. People would surround Sodhal to see him as if they would not die peacefully if they did not see him. The innocent and down to earth Sindhis fought each other over anything belonging to Sodhal. People gave them something or the other wherever they went, those who had nothing would make sandbags for them. Looking at the love and sincerity of the people, Sodhal stared at the earth that was the bond and reason for their love.

In the villages Sodhal traversed, he always made a short stop, met the elders and provided them weapons to protect themselves. Quite a few young men of these villages joined his group when they left. His little army was now growing like an ever expanding

river in the monsoons. Sodhal almost never slept. When they camped anywhere, the men on the watch would find him strolling through them, looking in with their eyes to ensure they were awake. His comrades tried to get him to rest but that was something Sodhal had nearly forgotten.

Sodhal's life was like the reddish clouds before sunset, which had streaks of blood in addition to the light. His eyes were thoughtful yet he was quiet, but the quietness was like a lull before a storm. No one dared to speak to him except Aloo who always had his ways to get Sodhal to say something. In any case the conditions were such that not only Sodhal but even the other men did not indulge in small talk. Their hearts pounded with the thoughts of war they were preparing for.

The young men of Sindh had become so brave that they had started confronting the local Tarkhans claiming that they were Sodhal's men and if they did not keep away from hurting Sindhis, they would lodge a formal complaint with Sodhal. Many a tribe sent their invitations to Sodhal but he had always replied: "Brothers, if you want to invite me to a feast, have a group of young men ready who can join us." And so like the monsoon rain, Sodhal's men were ever increasing in numbers. In a very short time, instead of sticks and axes, they started possessing swords and spears that they took from the defeated Tarkhan

soldiers. The special thing about them was equality among them. Every one ate the same food and slept on the ground. They were rostered on guard duties in turns and that included Sodhal. There was only one difference; at the time of any war or conflict, Sodhal's word was final. No one would question his authority. Night attacks on small sized Tarkhan cantonments became a usual chore. They were not strong enough to fight the Tarkhan army therefore Sodhal usually attacked smaller contingents of Tarkhans after nightfall, usually taking the enemy by surprise.

One dark moonless night, Sodhal left his group behind and was only accompanied by 20 or so men. They were about to return when they saw a camp site because of the glow from the torches. Sodhal saw the lights first and that became his target which he followed with a straight path. There was something about the lights that attracted Sodhal. When they got close to the site, Sodhal signalled his men to dismount; they tied their horses to trees and advanced towards the tents on foot. Reaching the vicinity of the tents, they noticed there were about 50 tents in all and in front of two of them; a few torches lit the scene. Some soldiers were taking turns to guard the tents.

Sodhal asked his men to stay back at a low level on the ground and advanced between the tents to the main area near the lights. Outside one of those tents, 4 guards were engaged in careless chatting. The area was

so well lit up that coming out of the dark was perilous, but Sodhal slowly went behind a tent and holding his dagger in his hand waited for his next move. Right then a guard appeared, Sodhal hid behind a tent and stood there holding his breath. He knew the guard will see him when he crosses the tent, but he was ready for him. As soon as the guard came up, Sodhal went behind him and covering his mouth with one hand stabbed the dagger through the guard's back. The scream of the Tarkhan died in his hand. Sodhal kept his mouth covered until he was sure he was dead and then laid the man behind the tent in a way that only his feet were visible. The next guard would be there any moment, Sodhal thought and once again he took cover and waited. The guard came over and saw the feet of the first guard; he thought that he must have been tired and had gone to sleep. He smiled at his friend and said, "You rascal, you are sleeping on duty..., wait until..." but as soon as he tried to pull the guard by his legs, an iron fist grasped his throat. The lights of the tent became cloudy and his eyes started rolling, he tried to scream but he felt his tongue had been avulsed from its root. From the pain in his neck he tried to cry but he felt like his eyes had been gouged out. He tried his best to save himself but he knew his time was up and he fell like a log on his dead friend.

Leaving him there, Sodhal again took cover; he was not sure if there were more guards so he waited behind the tent for a while and started cutting the cloth

of the tent with his knife. When there was a hole enough to let him in, he jumped in the tent. In the light of the torches what he saw tore his heart to pieces. Sanghaar was tied up there with ropes and was facing him, two large black holes were present where once his eyes were, from which a yellowish ooze had dried up in his beard. His body was covered with numerous cuts and bruises. Despite his injuries and blindness, the Tarkhans had tied him up hard as they must have been so scared of him. For a moment Sodhal's mind went numb. A burning sensation went through his eyes, and he could not bear it. He took his dagger out and went to the door; as soon as he came out, rage took him over. The guards were surprised on how he came out of that tent and who he was. The first Tarkhan felt a ball of fire that went through his back, he screamed and fell. Sodhal took the fallen man's sword and pierced it in the belly of another guard. He left the sword in his belly and went and lifted a third guard by his waistband and threw him like he was a piece of wood. All this happened with a speed that the fourth sentry could not comprehend what was going on and before he could even wink, Sodhal was on him. He took the soldier's spear and put it through his chest. Hearing the screams the guard from the adjoining tent drew his sword and advanced towards Sodhal. Sodhal threw his spear at him, the guard ducked but a little too late...the spear went through his neck instead of the stomach where it was aimed, and he died before he could even make a sound.

Sodhal observed his surroundings and felt that...the Tarkhans were waking up to the noises and were getting their weapons...Sodhal quickly entered the tent and lifted Sanghaar like a sack on his shoulder and went through the back entrance and made his way to his waiting group. There he whispered some instructions to his four men who left for the tents while the rest returned to their horses.

Sodhal cut the ropes of Sanghaar and put him on his mare. He signalled his men to get ready with their horses and went away. Within minute all the tents were on fire, and in the light Sodhal returned with the four men to his group. He rode on his mare with Sanghaar sitting in front and they rode away.

Once at their destination he carefully got Sanghaar down; the men circled around and watched this blind man. Sodhal signalled to Aloo who brought some hot water and started wiping Sanghaar's wounds. It was then when Sanghaar said very slowly, "Why doesn't anyone speak, hey..., does any of you know Sindhi?"

He said it with so much pain; all the men had tears in their eyes. Sanghaar asked again, "Who are you people?"

Sodhal replied softly, "Brother, it's me Sodhal."

For a few minutes everyone was quiet, and then

a smile appeared on Sanghaar's face. "Oh, so that is it. I was wondering that it had to be Sodhal to get into the troops of Ameer Khan, but Sodhal....., what use can I be of now,,!"

Sodhal held his head down and was very sad. It was true Sanghaar was worth a hundred men..., but now..., his blind brother."He was reminded of his sister-in-law Bhagul and pensively, he walked away.

Sodhal never did anything without consulting his comrades.If he did not like their advice, he used to remain quiet. His expression told the comrades to revisit their advice and usually it was Sodhal who prevailed. His comrades included men who had formed their own little groups and had fought the Arghuns and Tarkhans before joining Sodhal. They used to discuss matters amongst their group before coming to Sodhal. As a result, whatever they did, the decision was unanimous. When the number of the men reached over ten thousand, the younger men of the group were getting hyper-excited. They sent their leaders to induct more men and then plan to attack Thatta and capture Mirza Baqi. They wanted to decide this war once and for all; either Sindh would be freed or they would happily give their lives fighting for their goal. The expression on Sodhal's face was such that no one was sure whether he agreed with the idea or not. Until a final decision was made they heard a voice which although lacked the authority of Sodhal but had

a similar confidence. It was Sanghaar's voice, who said, "Brothers, there are about 70,000 soldiers in the Tarkhan cantonment at Thatta. On this side of the river, about 40,000 Tarkhans are also present in their own battalions. In addition to these, there are some 6000 warriors of Mirza Baqi stationed about 6 furlongs from Thatta, and they are all riders and fully armed. Inside Thatta, some 15000 Tarkhans and Arghuns under the control of Ameer Khan are camped to control the city. So being hasty will not bear fruit. We Sindhis may be valiant warriors but underestimating the enemy does not carry any wisdom. And then Mirza Jani Baig is there in Sehwan. Tha Bakhar fort is brimming with Tarkhan soldiers. The road to Kandhar remains open; let us plan in a way that this movement is not crushed like the previous ones by the enemy."

There was utter silence; everybody realized what had been said. Many among them had not ever seen those cantonments; hearing about the figures, quite a few among them had an expression of helplessness on their faces. Sodhal, Sanghaar and a few others had fought in these cantonments and knew what they were up against.

"So then?" A sober looking youngster who was wearing earrings said anxiously.

"Brother, if you ask me, I feel that firstly we should have our own cantonment, a fort of some kind, where we can prepare for the war. We could collect

weapons, horses, cattle and other goods, and from there we could get control of Sehwan so that our brothers from the north could help us disconnect the supply line of Tarkhans from Kandhar, Multan and other places. Then we go to the fort of Bhakar. If Sehwan and Bhakar fall, panic would hit Thatta and then we wage our final assault in Thatta. Brothers, freeing Sindh from these cruel foreigners will not be a game of one or two days, it requires sacrifices of a lifetime; each day of our life, each hour of the day and each minute of the hour.”

The crowd suddenly cheered up, they were overjoyed. It took no time to finalize that apart from some men to guard the locality, the whole army should attack Mohankot. Once they have a cantonment in Mohankot, they could raid Sehwan at nights. The smile on Sodhal's face rejuvenated his men, who exuded pride in their smiles. When you have an ideal to achieve, even the smile exudes confidence. Sacrificing one's life with a smile was something to be learnt from a Sindhi. Despite the hunger and poverty, Sindhis were all too ready to give their life for their dear motherland.

When they launched their attack on Mohankot, Arghuns and Tarkhans must have perceived it as if a lightning had struck them. Some older Tarkhans who had an experience of wars with Sindhis had only seen such fervour in the days of Doolah Daryah Khan. These Sindhis were strange creatures, who had only

wide-bladed axes instead of spears and swords. Those who had swords did not hold their armours affront. They fought like this was their last war, where they did not look bothered about winning or losing, all they wanted was who gets to the fort entrance first. Some Tarkhans laughed when they saw these men. They were only a handful in comparison to their forces. Their total army was less than the horse-mounted soldiers of the Tarkhan army, and the infantry with all sorts of weapons was in addition to these. These Sindhis did not even know to file proper ranks, and they advanced to fight like they were there to hunt wild boar for fun....., but very soon the Tarkhans were surprised that they were offering a very tough struggle and Tarkhans were retreating towards the fort entrance. They were not Sindhis but some demonic creatures that flew with their weapons and struck with all the might they could muster. They had no leader or vanguard, they just fought shoulder to shoulder as if the whole army was one man that had no love for his life and that he was determined to lay down for his motherland. One of them was fighting with both hands and whose mare turned between the falling Tarkhans like lightning; his sword was going through two Tarkhans at the same time, the Tarkhans near him were running away from him as if they had seen a ghost.

The day went by and the scorching sun increased the vigour of the fighting. The earth was hot, the horses were panting and the blood was boiling; the

surge of blood made the Sindhis' hearts swell with confidence and they all raised a slogan, "Jiye Sindh." The slogan pierced through the skies, the pillars of the fort and the hearts of the Tarkhans shook in horror. They stopped fighting and entered the fort. Tarkhans' heads were falling like harvested crops. The horses threw their riders and many were trampled under the panicking animals. Tarkhans started escaping through the entrance but they were keenly followed. A sea of men was retreating but the Sindhis did not let them, and kept killing them until they could.

When Sodhal and his men crossed the barriers of the fort and entered the city, the people of Mohankot were in a strange condition. They beat the drums and welcomed these brave warriors; the windows, the doors, the balconies were full with people who showered flowers on their saviours. The women came and hugged their brothers who they had longed to see forever. Older women raised their hands and prayed for their brave sons of the soil. People danced and sang war songs and folk music was played. While they rejoiced their eyes were full of tears, tears of happiness and joy. Everyone laughed and cried simultaneously. Sodhal had left the reins of his mare, that trotted in style, stopping when it saw a crowd of people. They put flower wreaths on the animal. Sodhal's clothes were red with drops of blood and wherever he went, people wanted to have a glimpse of him and touch

him. Sodhal's face showed a happiness that had never been there. His eyes had a new shine but his heart was full of a new storm of feelings. "Oh God, may the people of my land always laugh and rejoice like this..." This hope came from his heart and travelled to his eyes in the form of tears that wanted to become pearls forever.

13

The news that Mujahid Khan was heading with his army towards Sindh brought two different themes to Dadan's mind. One was a feeling that had made its way to his heart and soul like ripples in a pond and he longed to see Zeba yet again. The other thought was more like a hope or a dream that he imagined. It was about Tarkhans being defeated in Sindh and returning to Kandhar, with the result that a free Sindh would come up once again on the world map. He felt as if a dark cloud was casting its shadow on that hope, despite knowing those clouds, he wanted to ignore them. Would the Moghuls hand over the prized gift of Sindh to Sindhis after taking it from the Tarkhans? This land of gold for which Alexander the Great was compelled to say, "I wish Sindh was a part of Greece then, the Greeks would not have to fight wars with other countries...." Would Akbar give away that rich Sindh? These were questions he did not want to think about, but kept coming back from the crevices of his mind. He tried Zeba's thought and memories to overcome and overwhelm the dark shadows but to no avail.

Ever since his return, he was constantly under surveillance by Tarkhan spies and he had to wear a

Tarkhan attire to evade them. He was desperate to go home but instead had gone to Thatta on the orders of Akhund Noor Muhammad. He was to travel to Lahore to deliver the letter written by Mirza Baqi, which would clarify things but the administrative responsibilities concerning the seminaries of Thatta delayed his departure. Seeing the atrocities committed by the Tarkhans, he was very angry but kept his wish for revenge to his heart. The ever changing political scenario also required him to stay in Thatta where he would be well informed about happenings of Lahore, Multan and Agra.

When he heard the stories of Sanghaar and Sodhal, he felt very proud. He was so much in awe of Sodhal, he never dared to see him directly in his eyes. Looking into those eyes was not easy. Sodhal did not approve his living in seminaries and reading books, so much so that when Dadan came home for a day or two, Sodhal would not speak to him. But if he had to, he would say, "Dadan, we are people who have to struggle; if we get into these bookish things, a day will come when we will have forgotten about Sindh. So shun this dirty politics, sit here where you belong and think about this motherland. Once your country is freed from these foreigners, you can go back to your seminaries, which are not going anywhere!" Contrary to Sodhal, Sanghaar was his soul mate. He was of a happy-go-lucky type, so he did what pleased him. When he had left for the hills, Dadan was the only one

who had not objected. They were more like best friends than brothers. Sometimes he used to whisper to Dadan, "Brother, let go of your books, let us go and rob a Tarkhan; they have collected a lot of money and riches!" And then he would retract and say, "No brother, I was just joking; do not even think of doing any such thing. Go and get your education, we remained illiterate but at least one of our brothers should be called an educated person!" Dadan had supported Sanghaar on the issue of Bhagul and thinking of that incident he could not help laughing. He felt Sodhal was caged in a glass cage and disturbing him only meant trouble; while Sanghaar was a free bird who could not be kept in captivity.

And when the reports of Sodhal's army reached him, Dadan felt he had wasted his entire life. He felt as if he was the lid of a pot from which people had stopped drinking. He felt ashamed of himself and with these feelings; he begged leave from Akhund Noor Muhammad and went home.

Bhagul was stunned to see a Tarkhan entering the house and she threw a glance at her sister-in-law as if she had not seen the stranger. Dadan was about to turn around after closing the door when he heard steps behind him....., and what he saw sent a chill down his spine. His younger sister-in-law stood there with a knife drawn in a way that she would have pierced it in his back, had he not turned around in time. The

daughters of Sindh had suffered so much that despite not being so strong, they had started being armed with knives. Self defence is a feeling that could provoke even the weakest soul to take up an offensive stance.

"Sister, it's me..., Dadan!" he said. His sister-in-law was shocked and Bhagul's expression too was similar. Hesitantly she welcomed him and said, "May God give you a long life, I was so scared."

"Where is Sanwal? Nobody seems to be home, where is brother Sanghaar?"

No one answered..., staring into the vacant and pensive eyes of Sanghaar's wife, he said, "Sister is everything ok? What happened to my brother...?"

Bhagul did not respond, a few moments later the younger sister-in-law said, "It has been months since your brother left..., we have been looking forward to see him all this time..."

Bhagul burst into tears and covered her face with her scarf. Dadan was too worried about the unknown.

"But what happened? "His words were reassuring but at the same time they carried all the pain Dadan was feeling.

"We have heard that the Tarkhans have arrested him.....!"

Dadan was confused; he had not heard any such news in Thatta. Although he had reports that Sanghaar had entered Mirza Baqi's mansion, who had escaped from there. From there Sanghaar was seen to be riding towards the village. Akhund Noor Muhammad had also not mentioned his arrest.

".....and where is father?" Dadan asked but Sanghaar was still on his mind.

"He is fine....., must be in the mosque, or at the shop of Dayo the goldsmith...., he sits at the shop and keeps asking about what was happening around from people who travel....., or accompanied by Sanwal, looks after the herd.

With a tired look, Dadan sat on a charpoy. Looking at the pain of his pretty sister-in-law, he bit his lower lip. His mind was stormed by different thoughts, he looked again at the woman whose tears flowed because she could not control them; he tried to reassure her, "Sister, tears will not bring him back, he is worth a hundred men, I think he is too smart to be arrested by Tarkhans. You need to relax and have control....." He felt his words lacking the truth.

"Brother, what will I do with my broken heart..., I just cannot forget the whole thing. Since he has left, hundreds of scary thoughts overwhelm my mind. I never worried in the previous revolts but this time, I do not know why but I am doubting myself..., I

had stopped him, but he did not listen..., even now....." And she started weeping again.

Dadan had known how they loved each other; if anything happened to Sanghaar, she used to become crazy. She had left her relatives for Sanghaar only. He was still thinking about Sanghaar and Bhagul when his father entered the house. The father and son kept looking at each other for a few moments, the old man was angry and bewildered to see a Tarkhan in his house....., but those eyes could not belong to a Tarkhan and he recognized his son in an instant; the older gent smiled and took him in his embrace. Holding him, he said, "Son, since when have my sons started to attire like the enemy to save their skin?" The old man must have suffered a lot all these years.

"Not to save my skin, father but I did this for a special task." Dadan tried to hide his embarrassment.

The elderly man held him in his arms and remembered his younger days, he squeezed on him and said, "A profession that gets you to leave your ancestral habits is better shunned, son."

They chatted for a long time. Dadan was told that the Tarkhans had tried to burn the village a couple of times and how the villagers had thwarted those attempts. Now even the women had taken up arms to confront Tarkhans. While they chatted, Dhanoo entered the house with a pile of grass on his shoulder.

He too was surprised to see a Tarkhan in the house talking to his father.

Dadan came forward and hugged him. Dadan's voice brought a wide smile on Dhanoo's face. Dadan had never been able to understand this brother of his; who had nothing to do with the world; who spoke to himself while roaming the streets, who talked to the goats and birds and other animals in a way as if they understood him; who would have tears in his eyes even if he saw blood, who used to play his mouth organ '*chang*' so melodiously that the birds stopped and used to listen to the tune. If a cow would not let itself be milked, he would play the organ and his father would milk away buckets without a bother!

Dhanoo hugged and kissed him and said, "Dadan, you have forgotten us!"

Dadan could not reply, he just kept his brother in his embrace and felt his love pouring out of his heart. But then Dhanoo said something that left Dadan stunned, "Dadan, please go and talk to Sodhal, or else he will get people killed."

Dadan remained quiet. Dhanoo's words had not only surprised him but had made him think. Staring into his face, he asked, "Dhana, how do you know Sodhal's men could get killed?"

"A bird was telling me that the Moghuls have

crossed Bakhar and have reached Sehwan," Dhanoo said innocently, "... and Sodhal is planning to invade Sehwan from Mohankot."

"Mohankot?!"

"Sodhal is camped at Mohankot."

Dadan was now utterly bewildered; he had always considered Dhanoo to be an innocent and ignorant soul, who had no interest in worldly matters. But the issue he was pointing to indicated that he was aware of each and every fight and insurgency occurring in Sindh. Trying one last time he offered, "But why would the Moghuls fight with Sodhal? They are here to teach Mirza Baqi a lesson!"

Dhanoo's eyes suddenly had hatred that surprised Dadan; this was the man who did not know how to hate, one who was just made for love. He used to become sad on seeing others getting angry. But today his eyes showed not only signs of hate but an extreme anger. He replied, "Moghuls are not relatives of Sodhal or Sindhis; they are Mirza Baqi's relatives, Dadan!"

"Mirza Baqi's relatives? How is that?"

"Moghuls, Arghuns and Tarkhans are distant cousins. When Mirza Baqi anticipated the wrath of Sindhis, he sent his daughter to Akbar. When she entered the Emperor's harem, there was uproar in

Agra. People said the bloody daughter of the bloody murderer has come But when Akbar lifted her chin and saw those beautiful eyes, and when she covered her face with her hands, Akbar only saw the henna coloured hands and forgot the blood of Sindhis. He muttered, "Mujahid Khan, I want to crush the insurgency in Sindh so that Mirza Baqi could do his duties in our allegiance in a better way."

These were definitely not Dhanoo's words. He was narrating complicated issues of politics like he had been to Akbar's assembly and has seen everything unfold in front of him.

He put both his hands on Dhanoo's shoulders and said, "Brother, you have shaken me up. I am not sure what to say to you but at least tell me where you heard all of that." Dadan's heart was sinking from an unknown fear while he spoke.

Dhanoo went into a trance for a moment. But then his face lit up and looking at Dadan's eyes he said, "Brother, surely we are like gypsies but are not as foolish to be sleeping while our house is not in order. We have kept our shrines lighted with torches. The gypsies and the saints roam all over Sindh, from palaces to the shadows of the brothels; our sleep is our prayer Dadan, and if the love of the land is absent then that worship is of no use. Our brothers attired like beggars are spread all over the terrain doing whatever they can."

The words and the emotion they contained pierced Dadan's ears like molten metal. He felt like he had wasted his entire life. All his life he had been running after dirty politics, changing his attire and imposing what he was not and now when the whole chapter of that politics was about to end, he found himself bound into a halo of extreme confusion in his own home. He felt a knot in his throat from embarrassment, and he hugged his brother and sulked, "Dhanoo, you have shaken me so much that I feel my neck will break. There are no goodbyes; if we live we shall meet again, may God be with you."

Dhanoo held him in his embrace for a long time as if he was trying to convey a silent message and finally mumbled, "Sanghaar is with Sodhal, if you are headed that way please send him home. I have reason to believe that he is not his normal self but did not reckon telling his wife about that."

When Dadan begged leave from his sister-in-law, for some reason Bhagul could not keep herself from sighing, she did not mean to be superstitious but she wondered of the times they had faced when these brave men of the household had left for a cause without even eating. She controlled her tears and whispered, "Son, God will keep you from evil."

She burst into tears that soaked the front of her fabric. Dadan could not bear her pain, he wondered about the countless women who were pouring tears for

their men to return. This was a pain that had no end and was unstoppable. He said, "Sister, my brother is safe, it is my promise that I will send him to you."

He did not wait for the next wave of tears and quickly said goodbye to his father and came out of the house. Dhanoo followed him and said to Dadan who was about to mount his horse, "Dadan, wear this shawl of mine above your dress, and replace the Tarkhani cap with my turban because where you are headed it would be perilous to be dressed like a Tarkhan.'

Dhanoo stood there for a long while after Dadan left and when he returned towards the house he said, "Dadan, you might come back but I hope to God that you bring Sindh with you."

The night was dark and so was the journey; crossing through mountains, dark clouds of worry and apprehension circled Dadan's mind. Wherever he passed by, he heard about the wars between Tarkhans and Sodhal's armies. Groups of young men travelled from every nook and corner of Sindh, some on horses while others on camels or even bare foot, headed to join Sodhal's men. These scenes made the tornados in Dadan's mind whorl faster. Some of them had spears and swords but most just had axes; some had only sticks and rods as their weapons. Despite the paucity and inferior quality of their weapons, their faces shone in a way that shook Dadan. The leaderless sea of labourers, farmers and ordinary men was out to fight

the enormous, well trained and organized army of the Moghuls. What was all this? Who were these young and old out to fight? With Mujahid Khan? That Mujahid Khan whose army training and discipline was known all over India; who had fought Rathores and Rajputs; who led an army where if one sentry broke his rank he would be killed by lashes on his back; whose horse riding skills were exemplary. My God! Please save my countrymen.

And what were these people thinking? Dadan felt an urge to get into the hearts of these people and see what was in there. His own heart told him that these Sindhis were oblivious of their foe; all they knew was that Sindh was hurt, Sindh was enslaved and they had to somehow free Sindh of these cruel rulers. With these thoughts in mind, he saw a crowd of men that had gathered in the village he was passing through. In the center of the mob were clouds of smoke that became thicker by the moment. He went near the crowd and what he saw reminded him of the Tarkhan presence in Sindh and their atrocities. Tarkhan soldiers armed with sword were controlling the mob. There was an intense fire in the center and in front of the fire a tall man stood tied up with ropes. A woman with her hands tied behind her back was there and two small and innocent children were trying to break through the hold of Tarkhan soldiers who restrained them. Besides them a Tarkhan preacher brushed his beard with his hand and was mumbling at the same time rolling his

prayer beads. Dadan got off his horse and tied it to a tree, and entered the crowd. People saw this man with gypsy attire but did not pay any special attention to him.

Suddenly the preacher raised his hand, which caused an unnatural silence in the crowd. Everyone held his breath. The preacher read a few holy verses and then proclaimed loudly, " Muslims, men of religion! The Quran rules that the penalty for rape is death and stoning a rapist is a virtue. In this religious government, that is how a sinner shall be punished as is defined in Shariah. This rascal Sindhi....., I mean this man who calls himself a Muslim has actually deviated from the religion and it has been proved so he is to go to hell. It is a wish of every good Muslim that they show these culprits the door to hell so that other Sindhis...., I mean the other Muslims could learn a lesson. Therefore, I mean that is why the ruler of the Muslims and the governor of Sindh His Highness Mirza Muhammad Baqi Beg Khan Tarkhan, through his decree has proclaimed these two culprits as sinners and the two illegitimate children born of this rape to be stoned and then thrown to burn in this fire."

From his robe the preacher took out a decree and showed it to the people and read it out loud. The order was in Persian, so the people could only understand the names. But when Dadan heard the wordings of the decree, he clenched his fists; blood

shot into his eyes. The order read that Tamachi son of Dodo Channo of this village had kept a Tarkhan noble's daughter as mistress and had two children without a proper and legal wedding through Nikah. After their arrest, the local mayor of the village was under orders to follow the religious decree from the preacher and get him punished.

Dadan was about to utter his feelings that "Oh, so this is all about the daughter of a Tarkhan noble who had eloped with a Sindhi! Tarkhans had their own version of religion and Shariah!" And then he looked at the woman who looked like an innocent villager in the Sindhi dress she wore. Her eyes showed the horror she felt and at the same time the love for her beloved and her children was only too obvious. Her gaze was fixed not on the fire but on Tamachi and every now and then she glanced towards her two boys. Two drops of tears had dried up on the sides of her lips that gave the look of a smile on her face that hid her fear.

People whispered in each other's ears and their unrest was obvious. The preacher raised his hand again to silence the mob. And then he said, "Who is the Muslim, good enough to be the first one to throw stones at them? From a religious standpoint, it would be a great service and the reward will be gotten in both the worlds."

The crowd went quiet again as if they were all dead. Everyone had lost his speech and had become

dumb. Like a stone, they showed no sign of life in them. The shadows reflected by their eyes only had the spears and swords of Tarkhan soldiers in them. But suddenly someone started advancing through the crowd; people noticed it was the same man in gypsy attire, some had already spotted him but now when he headed towards the preacher, the gypsy heard someone say, "Who is this rascal?"

But Dadan kept his pace..., he headed towards the preacher who showed signs of joy as if he had thought no Sindhi would be ready to throw the first stone. The preacher came a couple of steps forward to embrace him with a wide smile. When he hugged Dadan, the preacher suddenly felt something very sharp pointing in his belly and he heard in a crisp Persian accent, "Preacher, tell your soldiers to release them at once or this dagger will go through your intestines."

The cleric went pale and started trembling; the point of the dagger went a little deeper into him and he felt blood trickling to his navel. The wet feeling of blood increased his shivering and he tried to break free but in vain.

"I would not wait any longer..., I will count to ten..., one, two" Dadan whispered.

The cleric stammered and then shouted to a Tarkhan soldier, "let them go..., free them now!"

Tarkhan soldiers could hardly trust their ears. They looked at the preacher with astonishment.

"Three..., four...!" With this voice he felt the dagger going a couple of inches deeper into him. He cried out, "For God's sake hurry up....., free them now.....,or...,or.....!"

"Five, six...!"The dagger made another move.

"Or... I will get the mayor to order for killing you..., hurry up."

On hearing this the soldiers started cutting the ropes holding Tamachi, his woman and the boys. The crowd was silent again, hundreds of eyes focused on the shivering cleric in the embrace of the gypsy. When their ropes were cut, Dadan -the gypsy said aloud in Sindhi, "Tamachi, behind this crowd on the left, you will find my brown horse, ride to the blacksmith's colony. Do not stop anywhere. My men will meet you there in the seminary, tell them you bring greetings from Dadan. Now hurry up so you can reach before the sun sets may you live happily with your family."

Tamachi and his wife looked at this gypsy with grateful eyes that also showed their surprise alongside their thankfulness. It had an identity that was similar to Dadan but that had no name, it just showed. They started to clear the crowd that cheered them with congratulations and some of them escorted them to the horse.

The crowd quitted again to see the preacher was still in the clutches of death. The gypsy said in Persian, "Now tell the Tarkhan soldiers to return to their cantonment...."

Tarkhans had now understood the circumstances and three of them took positions with their spears behind Dadan. The gypsy did not heed them and said, "If any of you makes one move, I am going to put this dagger through this cleric!"

Tarkhans froze. They did not know what they should do. Preacher's death meant their death. This cleric was from among those had been called from Kandhar to teach Sindhis about religion and Persian language and if something happened to him, Ameer Khan's wrath was guaranteed. One of them gathered some courage and said, "Sindhi! You are asking for trouble, let go of the preacher or ..."

A scream from the preacher's mouth interrupted the soldier and he cried, "Rascal, shut your mouth and do as the Sindhi says."

Tarkhans bowed their heads which brought a smile on the gypsy's face; he signalled to a couple of young men from the crowd and said, "Brothers, confiscate their swords and spears."

Two men started collecting the weapons and if any Tarkhan resisted, they would just look at the gypsy and as their eyes met, another scream from the

preacher ensued. Tarkhans dismounted their horses and on a signal the young men brought the horses to the gypsy. He asked them to ride and released the preacher. The crowd noticed the blade of the gypsy's knife was shining with blood on it. After the weapons were distributed among the men, the gypsy took a sword and mounted a horse. He ordered the soldiers and the preacher to leave which they did with their heads bowed. The gypsy looked at the crowd and said, "Brothers, you were so many yet the Tarkhans were playing this bloody game. You just watched and may be cried but times have changed now. The entire Sindh has awakened to the call of freedom; your motherland calls upon you, those who love their country's honour more than their life can now spread and join the warriors of Sindh who have vouched to give their life for their motherland. Remember this message, do something before it is too late."

After this little speech, he turned his horse to leave and when he was ready, he chanted loudly, "Jiye Sindh."

The crowd also responded loudly, "Sada Jiye Sindh". And while the chanting went on, they saw the gypsy disappear from the scene.

This season the mighty Indus had a strange storm where as the days went by, its waters were tinged with the colour of blood. No one knew how it had happened. The gypsies that roamed the region said

that wherever Sodhal went through, the water took this hue. Some understood the gypsies and others did not but as Dadan passed by the villages and valleys, he saw a new kind of happiness in the people. When he reached Mohankot, people were dancing on the beat of the drums. They were singing their folk songs. And it was there that he heard that the fort of Sehwan had fallen and Sodhal had entered the city. Mirza Jani Baig had escaped and was heard to be planning to bring fresh troops from Thatta to attack Sehwan. Dadan's heart prayed and hoped. This uprising would be one of freedom..., but the Moghuls?! He did not want to even think of the Moghuls coming in their way of freedom of Sindh.

He was still at some distance from Sehwan when he spotted the seven-colored flags of Sindh like a rainbow hoisted on the pillars of the fort. He became emotional and dismounted from the horse, bowed his head and kissed the earth. "Almighty Allah, please keep that rainbow of Sindh hoisted, always! My Lord, bless the hopes and emotions that abound the hearts of Sindhis like the colour of the rainbow flag." When he stood up, his eyes had tears that were shining with the seven colors. He started towards the fort when he saw that about 20 Moghul soldiers came and surrounded him with their drawn swords.

"Who are you?" One of them demanded in Persian.

"A traveller!" Dadan replied briefly.

"Where are you headed?" The Moghul asked.

"Sehwan." Dadan's reply was once again very brief.

"How will you enter Sehwan?" A Moghul asked a little sternly this time.

"Why? Is there a ban on entering Sehwan?" Dadan asked in a surprised tone.

The Moghuls looked at each other; they stared into Dadan's face. One of them noticed the gypsy attire and he tugged at it with force. A part of the robe tore and exposed the Tarkhani dress and dagger in the waistband Dadan was wearing.

"Oh! ... Are you a Sindhi or a Tarkhan?" The Moghul asked with a smile.

"Tarkhan!" Dadan replied carefully.

"Why this attire then?" Moghul soldier stared at him.

"To be safe from Sindhis." Dadan said.

"What then brings you to Sehwan?" Moghul asked.

Dadan was not sure what should he say; if he showed his ignorance of Sodhal's control of the fort, they would not believe him as being a Tarkhan he must

be aware of Mirza Jani Baig's defeat. Pondering on that, he instead asked a question, "But who are you? And by what authority have you stopped me."

The Moghuls laughed on this question. The next moment a couple of them came forward and held him tightly. One of them searched him and found the letter Mirza Baqi had written to Kandhar. On reading the letter, the Moghuls were clearly astonished and they looked at Dadan with eyes that had mistrust and anger in them, "Speak the truth, who are you? And where do you take this letter?"

Dadan did not answer; he had almost forgotten the importance of the letter. Then he spoke in a rather flattering tone, "I was taking this letter to the revered Khan, the great Mujahid Khan so I could be rewarded."

"But where did you get this letter?" The Moghuls' surprise had no bounds.

"I can only disclose that to the great Khan." Dadan was enjoying the advantage he had now.

"Okay then, you shall be taken to the great Khan but remember, if you try to run you know what the consequences can be!"

The Moghuls tied his hands behind his back and put him on a horse and proceeded. On their way, he saw the enormous size of the Moghul army. On one side of the Sehwan fort, they were spread out for miles.

When they advanced further, the full force of the army sank Dadan's spirits. It was impossible to defeat this army. With 30,000 riders and around a 100,000 men, this army was enough to defeat India, the Sindhis were no match for them.

They crossed a few tents before coming to Mujahid Khan's royal arrangement; Dadan was reminded of Zeba. Her thought hurt him as at that time he was seeing this cursed army ready to take down the rainbow coloured flag of Sindh yet again. And when he was presented to Mujahid Khan, the gent's face became pale.

"You!" Mujahid Khan did not want to see him.

"I was on my way to pay you a visit when these men took me from where I was praying." Dadan taunted, trying to get Mujahid Khan's attention.

Mujahid Khan's signal sent his men away. He started walking to and fro in the tent. He kept doing that for a while and then he stopped; and looking at Dadan, indicated to him to be seated on a sofa. Dadan tried to read his expression by looking into his eyes. Mujahid Khan asked him again to sit down, on which Dadan laughed and said, "until your kindness could get my hands released, how could I be seated comfortably.'

The dual meaning of Dadan's words furthered Mujahid Khan's unease; he came forward and cut the

ropes with his knife and said, "Sindhi, do not try to embarrass me. I swear to God, I would have never come on this mission, only if I could do it without angering the Emperor."

Dadan remained quiet. A Moghul's promise was like stale water that had made a place in his heart. But Mujahid Khan was a soldier. And a soldier's promise is supposed to be solid. But then disobedience of Akbar was a pretext that had washed away a promise. He made another attempt to reconcile and said, "But sir, you are a well wisher of the Empire. The man who is conspiring with Iran against the Empire and that too on the behest of the Safwis, is being rewarded by the Emperor instead of being punished..., this is something I cannot comprehend."

"What proof do you have to level such an allegation that Mirza Baqi listens to the Safwis?" Mujahid Khan stopped strolling.

"The sentries who had arrested me had searched me and that document is in their possession, and that should be proof enough!" Dadan shot in the dark.

On Mujahid Khan's orders, the letter was produced and as he read it his face went red with rage. He clapped his hands and called the orderly.

"Mahmood Khan should be ordered to come to me at once." He ordered and sat on the sofa. The expression of apprehension and worry changed to

those of extreme anger, and when Mahmood Khan looked at him after the formal greetings, his heart trembled from an unknown fear.

"Mahmood Khan, I want this letter to be delivered to His Excellency along with a note from me. The reply needs to be brought to me forthwith. His Highness is camped at Lahore and it is desirable that he examines this letter before his planned departure to Agra."

"As you say, sir." Mahmood Khan answered.

"And take this Sindhi to my tent and he should be lodged as a royal guest."

"Your orders will be obeyed, sir." Mahmood Khan said and left.

Mujahid Khan returned to Dadan, whose eyes had a newfound hope in them. But Mujahid Khan's eyes still reflected his unease which he was trying to hide by wiping his face with his handkerchief. He then placed both his hands on Dadan's shoulders and said, "We have accepted the bravery of the Sindhis, and are rather surprised to know that they have defeated such a big force of Mirza Jani Baig. But if the Sindhis confront us, we will be forced to teach them a lesson."

"But sir, the Sindhis has no feud with Moghuls, why would they confront you? Their war is with the Tarkhans." Dadan wanted to make his point clear.

“Well, but who is this commander of Sindhi force called Sodhal? We have heard a lot of stories about his courage and bravery, is it true that he is just an ordinary blacksmith?” Dadan reckoned that the sarcasm in Mujahid Khan’s last words was meant to infuriate him. He pondered whether he should tell him who Sodhal was; thinking of Sodhal a strange hope came to his heart and he said with all the sincerity in him, “Every soldier of the Sindhi army is a Sodhal, sir. No doubt there are not any nobles, warlords or Nawabs in that army and most of them are from the working classes who have vowed to give their life for the freedom of their dear motherland and until Sindh is freed, they will not rest.”

“And if they have to fight with us...,” Mujahid Khan was feeling at ease now.

“Lord will not bring that day sir, but if war is imposed upon them, then the Moghuls will see that Sindhis are not in any way behind the Moghuls and will give their lives for their motherland with courage and bravery.” Dadan said politely.

“Tarkhans are a different story and fighting Moghuls is entirely different. If we wish we can capture Sehwan in a span of a day. Our men are tired, we do not want them to fight right now, but if the Sindhis announce their allegiance and surrender the Sehwan fort to us, I can present their case favourably in front of the emperor.”

The trickery of Mujahid Khan started a spark of hatred in Dadan's heart for the Moghuls. Expecting anything from them was futile. He was about to give a harsh reply but right then Mahmood Khan entered the room with Munshi Mukarram Khan so he remained silent.

"Okay, you go and take rest. I will call you tomorrow morning and we shall discuss this matter." Mujahid Khan pressed his shoulder and said.

On his way to the tent, Dadan was thinking about the impending war between Sodhal's little army and the enormous Moghul force. When one of his escorts stopped in front of a tent, Dadan came out of his dream like state. The escort party briefed the soldiers guarding the tent about Dadan and went back. Dadan's heart was filled with numerous questions and apprehensions. What answer will Akbar send? How many Moghul nobles were on Mirza Baqi's side? Mujahid Khan may not be against Sindh but what did his advisors think? He had no way to get an insight into these important facts. He held his head down and entered the tent where what he saw stopped all the storms brewing in his mind. Zeba with all her love in her eyes was there to welcome him. The smile on her face made him forget for a moment that now the Moghuls were as much the enemies of Sindhis as were the Tarkhans.

"Zeba ...you!" Dadan's words showed more

surprise than feelings.

“You did not come back so I had to come.” Love was written all over Zeba’s existence and without thinking she took his hands in hers. She was able to see the hurt and pain in Dadan’s eyes that she had always known. Her gloomy stranger was still as sad as one could be. She felt a tinge of grief in her heart and said, “Now that His Highness has kept his promise, what makes you sad?”

“Zeba, the great Khan kept his promise of bringing his troops to Sindh but not to fight the perpetrators of cruelty but the victims.....” He kept talking to her about the politics of Sindh and its intricacies. Talking about Sodhal brought so many emotions that mentioning him brought tears to his eyes.

“No, no, I will not let my father do that,” she was talking to herself, when the maid came to tell her that Mujahid Khan had sent for her. She looked at Dadan with love and left with an expression of her sincerity that comforted Dadan for a few minutes and he retired on the bed with tender feelings for her.

The presence of Zeba, her love and sympathy in fact increased the despondency Dadan was feeling. Zeba also knew how he felt. Although there was no conflict between his ideals and Zeba’s love, they were so far apart that bridging that gap seemed impossible...

and when Akbar had ordered that despite the letter from the great Khan, the insurgency against Mirza Baqi be checked, Dadan looked at Zeba in such a manner that she noticed how the sea of pain was washing away their love boat. Zeba wished not to see that happen and she slipped out of the tent.

The same evening Mujahid Khan sent for him and avoiding his stare he said, "Sindhi, I am very embarrassed but His Highness had regretted our plea and we will have to launch our attack on Sehwan."

Dadan did not utter a word; he had only one thing on his mind and that was to somehow get out from there and reach Sehwan. He was about to say something when Mujahid Khan said, "But I would hope that without causing any bloodshed, if Sindhis announce their allegiance to the throne, I can take the responsibility of having peace with them. Therefore I have resolved that Mahmood Khan, Dilawer Khan and you can go and negotiate with the commander of Sindhis."

Dadan felt like holding on to the last straw and he looked at Mujahid Khan with gratitude and left the tent.

The sun did not want to set that evening so as not to let the dark night engulf its rays shining over the horizon. But when it looked back, the shadows of the night approached like locust surrounding it from all sides. A little while later it saw itself on the end of a dark sea where darkness swallowed its light. Sodhal saw the helpless sun and deep disturbing thoughts engulfed his mind too. Why is it that light is always been taken over by darkness. He felt Sindh was like that sun and the shadow of darkness that was engulfing it was the sea of Moghul invaders. The very thought made his heart gallop, and he wondered why he felt so despondent. When they can uproot Tarkhan's black shadows, the darkness of Moghuls should not be difficult to deal with. He remembered the time when they were preparing for their assault on Sehwan and some people said that a small army consisting of Sindhi men was no match for the 20,000 riders and 100,000 Tarkhan men. A young lad who was about 16 years of age had said, "Brothers, like the rays of the shining sun we will overshadow the Tarkhan darkness," and that is what had happened. The Sindhis fought as if each of them had ten lives and they crucified the Tarkhans like they were unripe fruit that was bowing its head to be

taken away. Sodhal was very upset on Mirza Jani Baig's escape but Sadiq Soomro had said, "When we attack Thatta, even the ancestors of Jani Baig will bow before us. Do not lose heart Sodhal, the time is on our side now." These thoughts brought a smile on Sodhal's face and he told himself that the sun of Sindh shall rise again and will chase the darkness of Moghuls away. With this on his mind, he came down from his guard post.

A young lad was caressing the neck of his mare. How lovely that scene was! Sodhal felt as if the mare considered the lad as its own and every now and then brushing against the child and licking his arms and hands, just like it would do to its own foal. The boy spoke to the mare and laughed with the mare. Ever since he had come from Sehwan, this lad had been a regular visitor and Sodhal was always reminded of his favorite nephew Sanwal.

He came and stood behind the lad. The boy was busy playing with the mare but Sodhal's arrival caused the mare's ears to become pointed towards him. The boy noticed it too and turned around, Sodhal put his hand on the boy's shoulder and said, "Son, it is late now, you better head home now."

The boy asked a strange question; "Uncle, who are these Moghuls?"

Sodhal laughed and said, "Well they are distant

cousins of the Tarkhans."

"But some say that they have come here to straighten the Tarkhans..."

"That's exactly what they say son, but..."

"But what?" The boy could not comprehend. The sound of a rider made Sodhal silent, for some reason the sound of a horse always told him something and he wondered. The rider was known to him so he continued caressing the mare's neck. The rider came along and said slowly, "" Jiye Sindh."

"Jiye Sindh. Why mister, why do you speak so slowly?"

"Three men from the Moghuls with a white flag are standing at the entrance of the fort, they say they have brought a message from Mujahid Khan."

"I am going inside, you can bring them over, but do not forget to blindfold them," Sodhal reminded him. Sodhal went to his tent located to the north of his guard post. His comrades were already seated there. He told them that the Moghuls had come with a message and they shall see what it is. When the Moghuls came in, their blindfolds were released and what they saw surprised the Moghuls. They were used to the ways the nobles and the Moghul commanders living style; from gold plated crockery to marbled wine tumblers but seeing the men sitting on the floor on

plain sheets and simple dresses did not make sense to them. One of them did not look surprised and had all but his eyes covered with the end of his turban cloth. His eyes had a strange depth and a familiar look.

After the formal greetings, Sodhal offered them to take a seat on a mat. The Moghul with his covered face complied, but the other two remained standing. For them sitting down was too base a thought, but the one who was sitting compelled them to sit down. They did as told but their expression showed their obvious unease.

Sodhal started in Persian, "What brings you to us?"

The man with the covered face said, "His Highness the great Muhammad Jalaluddin Akbar, through his supreme commander Nawab Mujahid Khan sends his greetings, followed by the information that His Highness dislikes the insurgency and revolt in Sindh; he wants that everyone should live in peace and harmony. For this he has appointed Nawab Mujahid Khan to maintain law and order in Sindh. Mujahid Khan knows and admires your bravery, courage and sacrifices, but since he has arrived in Sindh to ensure that good governance prevails, you are advised to put an end to this insurgency, and to announce your allegiance to the Emperor, so you could be granted pardon. A letter containing these statements is presented to you on behalf of Mujahid Khan." He gave

the letter to Sodhal and looked at the other Moghuls who nodded their assent.

Sodhal remained quiet for a moment, read the letter and replied while looking at the Moghuls, "Let the Emperor of India and Nawab Mujahid Khan know after greetings from the Sindhis that firstly Sindhis have revolted against the cruelties here and that should be no business of the Moghuls. Secondly the stories of atrocities committed by the Tarkhans must have reached the Moghul Emperor, therefore his wrath should fall upon them not us, and thirdly Sindhis would prefer dying to allegiance to any foreigner, be it Tarkhan or Moghul!"

Sodhal's eyes shone with a new spark when he uttered these words and his face clearly showed he was not happy with the Moghuls.

"You must know that His Highness would most definitely issue orders to put an end to these atrocities so his people could live in peace. But it is important that the people announce their allegiance," the Moghul said it with an air of confusion.

"Sindhis will never accept allegiance to any foreigner who does not belong here," Sodhal said sternly.

One of the Moghuls could not restrain himself and interrupted, "You do not seem to be scared of the anger of His Highness, but remember the great Khan

will have each of the rebels trampled under elephants' feet, dragged by the horses until a time will come that not only Sindh but the skies will be begging forgiveness." The Moghul was shaking in anger and from pride.

Sodhal's face was red with anger; he stared at the Moghuls in a way they knew they were in trouble. Sodhal ground his teeth and said, "Had you not come to our doors as guest, I would have strangled you with my bare hands. We have seen such atrocities many a times. Our bones are aware of such blows for years, but now there is not a soul who could do that to Sindhis. Now get up and get lost. Say hello to your great Khan Doran and tell him to send a message to the Emperor that Sindh is a land that had given shelter to his father; that he too owes a lot to Sindh as this is where he breathed his first when he was born, that very Sindh will not hesitate from fighting with him if it comes to that. We do not understand kingdoms and politics but if any one even if that is Akbar who throws a malicious look towards Sindh will lose both his eyes, now get out and leave."

The Moghuls felt the anger of the words and ground their teeth. The Moghul with the covered face had a strange expression in his eyes that no one could read. Standing up he said very slowly, "For one last time I tell you that fighting Akbar's army is asking for death. If you announce allegiance to His Highness,

Mujahid Khan will try to stop Mirza Baqi from his atrocities and the state will be governed by the laws of His Excellency."

"This means that your "His Highness" intends to keep Mirza Baqi as the ruler and he wishes that on the one hand we let Mirza Baqi ruin Sindh and on the other we get ourselves into the clutches of Moghuls too and provide them their share. Until we are alive, we will wage a war with the Tarkhans, and in this event not only Akbar but even if the entire world supports the Tarkhans, we will not hesitate to fight that war." Sodhal said to end the negotiations.

The Moghuls came out and mumbled to each other for a while and then the Moghul with the covered face left the others there and went inside again. Sodhal saw him coming and so he asked, "What now?"

The Moghul did not answer and kept staring at Sodhal's face. That stare had a touch of familiarity and love. Sodhal could not understand the stare and was about to say something rude when the Moghul removed the cloth covering his face.

"Dadan, you..!"

"Yes brother, it is me, Dadan." And he came forward to embrace his brother, to the surprise of the onlookers who could not get around to what the Moghul was doing there, but noticing a sea of anger instead of love on Sodhal's face, he froze there. This

Sodhal was different from the man he knew as a brother.

“You are with the enemy..., Dadan.” Sodhal could not say more, the words got choked in his throat. He felt like finishing his brother with one stroke of his sword but at the moment he had come as a guest and attacking a guest was against his values.

Dadan felt very bad, he hated himself and the world around him and very unlike him he almost cried, “Brother, do not put such charge on me, may my life be sacrificed for Sindh, for God’s sake do not say that to me.”

These were words that came from his heart and had the expected effect on those around him. Sodhal’s heart sank with pain listening to the words and he took his brother in his embrace. Later Dadan hugged all his friends. Everyone was surprised how he had disguised himself as a Moghul. Dadan sat on the mat besides Sodhal.

“Brother, this Moghul problem has actually been brought by me. Akhund Noor Muhammad and other elders thought that if Akbar sends his troops against Mirza Baqi, they will run away to Kandhar and for some time Sindh may become a part of the Moghul Empire and live in peace. So I went to Agra and arranged all that.” Dadan kept his eyes on the ground trying to avoid Sodhal’s eyes.

“What right did Akhund Noor Muhammad or the others have to decide matters about Sindh on their own. We would have been able to get rid of the Tarkhans and fight them off, but now how will we get rid of the Moghul army?” Sodhal was angry with himself.

“Mujahid Khan had given me his word that after the Tarkhans, Sindh would be totally self reliant and a part of the Moghul Empire just for the sake of a name, and no Moghul would be appointed as governor.” Dadan said softly.

“There is a difference between self reliance and freedom Dadan,... so where are those promises the Moghuls had made? How are they supporting the Tarkhans now?” Sadiq Soomro asked.

“When Mujahid Khan crossed Multan and conquered Bakhar after defeating the Tarkhans, and when your forces were forcing them out of Sindh, Mirza Baqi sent his daughter with Mirza Paeenda Baig with a lot of gifts to the Emperor’s ministers and advisors, who played such a political game that Akbar sent a note of pardon for Mirza Baqi. He ordered Mujahid Khan that since Mirza Baqi had announced his allegiance to the Empire, he should go and put an end to the insurgency in Sindh.’ Dadan explained.

Everyone was astonished to see the response of Akbar. Sodhal remained quiet for a moment and facing

Dadan he said, "So what do you suggest we do?"

Dadan thought for a while. He had in front of him the huge army Mujahid Khan led, and in his mind he compared these brave warriors of Sindh. Whatever the case, the Sindhis were ready to lay down their lives for their dear motherland but then there was a Moghul army of about 150,000 soldiers, who had elephants, horses, cannons and Rajput and Rohilla riders. Fighting them was way too much for this little army. On the other hand if this Sindhi force was at hand and if Akbar agrees to some terms of allegiance with some gifts to his advisors, at the least Sindh would have some sort of freedom. He was aware of the fact that on Moghul's signal Mirza Jani Baig had also left Thatta with his forces and was headed this way. Taking on two armies was out of question and perilous. The Moghuls would not leave until this group announced its allegiance to them. Mujahid Khan might listen to him but the other commanders had to prove their loyalty to Akbar. He was weighing different options when a man entered the room and whispered something in Sodhal's ear. Sodhal's face went red and his eyes shone. Sadiq Soomro could not keep silent and asked, "Sodhal, whats the news?"

"Ameer Khan and Mirza Jani Baig have brought their armies and reached behind the fort near the broken bridge."

Dadan looked at Sodhal whose eyes were exuding fire. These were the eyes Dadan always feared. But Dadan could not refrain from opening up and said, "Brother, I had heard that Mirza Jani Baig was due on course this way, fighting with the Moghuls under these circumstance will be foolish. I think making peace with Mujahid Khan would be wise."

"Dadan, we are not here to show our wisdom, if we had that in mind we would not have left our houses." Sodhal tried to control his anger.

"But brother, how can we fight two armies? There would be at least 50,000 men with Ameer Khan, the Moghuls would attack us from the front and Ameer Khan from the back..."

"Then we will fight them both." Sodhal tried to end the discussion.

"But we should look at our strength too!" Dadan blurted.

Sodhal looked at him with eyes that showed neither love nor understanding. Thinking of something Sodhal said, "Dadan, you had brought a message from the Moghuls, now before the fighting starts, its best you deliver our reply to them."

The taunt in Sodhal's words hurt Dadan. Among all these Sindhis, his own real brother thought of him to not belong with them. He was angry now;

Sodhal will get hundreds of Sindhis killed to show his bravery. He was reminded of the thousands of Sindhis who were ready to sacrifice their lives on Sodhal's order. His brother surely knew how to fight but was oblivious to the politik and planning strategies. And he knew well about these politics, so how could he remain quiet and get Sindhis slaughtered. He remembered Dhanoo's words who had said something similar about Sodhal getting men killed. So he said pensively, "Brother, I do not care for my life as you taunted that I should reach the Moghuls! I was only considering and thinking about the thousands of Sindhis who not only for now but even in future will have to fight wars to defend their motherland. I understand that there is no way out of a war but fighting like this without any planning and showing your bravery will not bear fruit."

These words made the entire group think and Qabool Muhammad supported Dadan's view and said, "Sodhal, what he says needs to be considered."

Sodhal did not answer, only his expression showed how sad he was. Dadan could not bear that expression and almost apologetically said, "Brother, I am younger than you, but I have spent many years of my life with Moghuls, I know everything about their ways to fight, their cunningness and their weaknesses too. If you follow my advice, prepare a group of 500 to 1000 men and attack the Moghuls in a way that they

think it is a night raid. In such circumstances instead of providing support to the Tarkhans, they will get busy in strengthening their own camps and posts. While this happens, you attack the Tarkhans and try and uproot Ameer Khan and Mirza Jani Baig's forces so they cannot attack you from behind the fort. If the Tarkhans retreat, the Moghuls too will avoid a direct war and in the meantime I might be able to negotiate with Mujahid Khan."

Everyone liked the idea and Sodhal too did not negate it. Sadiq Soomro was given the task to prepare a group and attack the Moghuls. Dadan briefed Sadiq Soomro about the positions of the Moghul army and their posts and instructed him to avoid a direct attack. Instead they should divide themselves into smaller groups and attack their ammunition depots, stables and places they stored food and grain. After briefing Sadiq, Dadan wanted to leave and faced Sodhal. The two brothers kept looking at each other for a while and then their arms rose to embrace each other. Dadan had never felt so much love in Sodhal's embrace and then Sodhal said, "Dadan, may God be with you."

Dadan was about to leave when someone called him. He knew the voice and looked back. Sanghaar stood there with his hand on another man's shoulder and was looking towards Dadan with his blind eyes. Dadan felt a pain in his chest, even the thought of this handsome man being blind was shocking. His hatred

for Tarkhans mounted in his heart and soul. He ran and embraced his brother; they remained that way for a long time. Sanghaar cleared his throat and tried to control his emotions and said, "Dadan, do look after my Sindh!"

How much more pain could be there in those words as if he was saying, "brother, take care of my honour." Dadan felt his heart sulking and he came out with a bowed head. The Moghuls waiting outside had started worrying about him. The guard put blindfolds on all of them again and once outside the fort, removed them. He handed their horses over to them. Dadan looked back, he saw the seven- coloured flag of Sindh waving over the fort with the wind and in his heart he said, "Jiye Sindh."

Night brings with it sleep but the eyes in which Sindh dwelt could never sleep. Sindh had not slept for years as it longed for her freedom; it did not let her sons and warriors sleep. When the entire landscape is awake, how could the inhabitants doze off? On such a night when Sodhal got in the depth of the trench, his friends only had one thing on their minds and that was that the Tarkhans should not be aroused on their arrival. Sodhal kept going around giving instructions to his men, waiting for that opportune moment when the landscape of this beautiful Sindh would be echoing with their slogans and when that instant came, twenty thousand men raised in unison, the slogan of 'Jiye

Sindh', the Tarkhans were horrified. Mirza Jani Baig woke up startled. Everywhere there were screams and shouts, "Sindhis have come, they are here". The Tarkhans ran all around but there was no escape. They were surrounded by Sindhis, south to north and east to west. Mirza Jani Baig entered Ameer Khan's tent totally bewildered and almost cried, "Ameer Khan, what will happen now?"

Instead of reassuring this cowardly Tarkhan, Ameer Khan came out and started waking and organizing his men; his commanders started getting their soldiers in ranks but before the whole army could be awakened and reorganized, the Sindhis narrowed their circle. The earth shook with screams and cries. The out roar broke the courage of Ameer Khan's soldiers and most of them started running away, trying to find refuge in the darkness. But all the avenues of escape were guarded by the Sindhis. They were forced to return to their files. Somehow Ameer Khan managed to group some of his men and attack from one side. Seeing Ameer Khan, his men were slightly reassured and they prepared to fight. They were so many in numbers that Ameer Khan hoped if they just stood their ground, they could still win and that was in his mind all the time while he kept encouraging his men. He offered them lucrative offers if they won this war. It looked like Ameer Khan had gone crazy, he ran between his rank and file but he froze when he saw a group of Sindhis approaching towards him; the group

was led by his one time old buddy Sodhal. Ameer Khan felt like the earth was slipping away from under his feet, he tried to reassure himself that Sodhal had promised not to kill him but the fear still sent shivers down his spine.

Sodhal's arrival was like an angry river that engulfs everything in its path. His sword was finding its prey with lightning speed. His mare's movements were so brisk the Tarkhans did not know what to do and for most it was too late too little they could do. And then Sodhal spotted Ameer Khan and he turned his mare towards him. When the mare came near Ameer Khan, he shielded Sodhal's strike with his armour and said, "Sodhal Khan, you had swore that you will never attack me."

"I can go back on a thousand of such promises for Sindh." Sodhal shouted and just then his spear pierced Ameer Khan's windpipe.

Seeing Ameer Khan fall made the Tarkhans take to their feet. They were trying to run and escape but ended up falling victim to waiting swords and spears. Someone spread a rumour that Mirza Jani Baig had escaped behind the tents to a ditch where Sindhis were not present. They started running towards the ditch and just kept jumping. That was one place the Sindhis could not have secured. The arms of Sodhal and his men were tired as their swords had worked like machines making heads fall, and when the first light at

dawn showed on the horizon, the Sindhis again raised a slogan of Jiye Sindh.

It felt that at dawn the entire universe responded to that slogan by repeating it. And then there was quiet. The entire landscape was still. Sodhal walked over the corpses of hundreds of Tarkhans and came to the edge of the ditch, where he saw the corpses of those who had jumped to escape, lying in the deep ditch.

The mosques of the fort of Sehwan echoed with the call of prayers at dawn, when Sodhal and his men returned after collecting the arms and ammunition and other items from the stores of the Tarkhan army. Sodhal took his mare from the midst of the town and climbed the highest pillar of the fort, and what he saw warmed his heart. Thousands of Moghul tents were on fire and their flames were touching the skies in the distance. The screams of the Moghuls screeched through the plains. Sodhal smiled and came down, where he noticed Sadiq Soomro and his men were entering the fort. Sodhal went ahead and embraced Sadiq and said, "Well done, a great job Sadiq."

Sadiq looked at his friend with immense love who had made the Tarkhan army retreat but whose face showed no sign of his great achievement.

"Sodhal, now we will start quarelling! You have done a magnificent job and have fought all night, and

ECHO IS THE CALL

now instead of getting some rest you are climbing pillars at this hour. Come on, go and take some rest, we can chat later." Sadiq pretended he was angry.

"Whatever you say!" Sodhal said with a smile and went towards his tent with his men.

15

Sadiq Soomro's unexpected attack at night left the Moghuls bewildered. They did not know how and who attacked them as apparently there was no indication of any build up for such type of an attack. The screaming and the shouting from the pantries, stables and ammunition stores were loud enough to announce the presence of someone. And when the barns of grain caught fire, the Moghul soldiers ran towards them but the enemy was not to be found. One after the other, most of the tents were on fire; they were inhabited by the staff of the stores who saw themselves being surrounded by the fire. Their screams went through the skies and woke Mujahid Khan and other Moghul commanders. What they saw was unbelievable. It looked like it was broad daylight and thousands of men ran here and there. It was like a city was on fire and the people had nowhere to run; within no time the godowns, tents and stores were reduced to smouldering ash. Mujahid Khan was grinding his teeth in anger. When Mahmood Khan whispered, "Sir, it looks like the Sindhis are responsible for this", Mujahid Khan was shaking in rage. He held Mahmood Khan by his collar and admonished him so hard that he was about to faint. The other commanders saw how

Mahmood Khan was treated and started for their tents when they heard Mujahid Khan's order, "The entire force needs to be ready for war at once, let the bugle be sounded."

The bugles and pipes made the noise even more horrific. The tremendous army of the Moghuls was falling in and getting ready for the attack. Mujahid Khan mounted his white horse and examined the battalion of riders. He ordered the commanders of the infantry to advance towards the fort. He went to the elephantry division and gave them instructions after which he went to the cavalry division. He gathered the commanders and said ferociously, "I want to punish the Sindhis for this attack in a way that they could never ever even think of raising a finger towards Emperor Akbar's army. Tonight we should have the control of the fort, Dilawar Khan, Aatish Khan, Benazir Khan and Ram Singh, your parties would be in the lead, the other commanders will follow them. After the elephants break the entrances, all four of the commanders must attack from different sides. I swear to God, if this attack is not successful, I am going to behead you all with my own sword and present them to His Highness. Ram Singh! Instruct the Tarkhans to secure the back of the fort so the Sindhis get no chance to escape."

Zeba's heart sank when she saw the sea of an army heading towards the fort. She hastily entered

Dadan's tent. "You are resting here while the Khan is about to attack the fort." She was panting.

"Do not worry, conquering Sehwan will take Miujahid Khan years." Dadan laughed.

Zeba did not like his laugh. She was aware of the anger and bravery of Mujahid Khan. She thought they will conquer the fort before mid-day, she wondered what will happen to Dadan; she looked at him. Her look was more like a plea as if she was trying to say, "My love, take me to a place far from this politics based on falsehood." Dadan sort of comprehended those looks and said despite an urge not to, "Zeba, believe in me, let the great Khan try his luck, and when he returns after being defeated, his army will force him to abandon Sindh; when the great Khan travels to Lahore if you would join me, we will find ourselves a destination.

Zeba was about to say something when there was a sound behind the tent. She signalled to Dadan who went out of the tent at once but whoever was there had already left and disappeared. He came back to the tent but Zeba was not there. He tried to listen carefully and slowly entered the adjacent tent. At the entrance two Moghuls attacked him with their swords, he leapt away but the Moghuls turned on him again. He quickly lifted a sheet from the sofa and threw it over one Moghul's face and quickly grabbed the neck of the other soldier. With a sudden jerk he broke his

neck and took his sword. The first soldier was stunned by all the action and before he could react Dadan's sword went through his midriff and he fell to the ground with a grunt.

Dadan went out and checked the other tents but Zeba was not there. Going towards the harems of Moghuls was unsafe and staying back in the tent was also perilous. He could not understand who was behind the attack since he was a guest of Mujahid Khan. Some Moghul commanders had their doubts about him, and considering this fact he took a horse and rode behind the Moghul army.

When the Moghul force was advancing towards the fort, the fire from the tents produced strange shadows of the army that appeared like an army of ghosts. As the sun rose on the horizon, these shadows were trampled by their own masters. When the sun was finally shining fully, the sea of soldier's had reached outside the fort and were preparing for their final assault. Mujahid Khan signalled to the men manning the elephants to assign 10 elephants for each of the four entrances to the fort. But when the elephants were advancing towards the fort, a sea of arrows started raining from the posts and pillars of the fort. Their riders started falling and the elephants retreated trampling their own riders. The elephants were once again turned around with new riders but they too met the same fate. As the sun shone and the

earth warmed up, the Moghuls were feeling the heat. Thirst and hunger reminded them of their burnt tents. The beautiful sunshine of Sindh pierced their bodies and they started turning around.

Mujahid Khan was furious with the retreating riders but when Ram Singh's men which had been sent to the Tarkhans returned and told Mujahid Khan not about an army of Tarkhans but their mutilated and burnt rotting bodies, Mujahid Khan for the first time in his life felt ashamed and embarrassed at his cavalier and hasty behavior. But he did not want to abandon his attack. He ordered the Rohilas and Rathores to take their ropes and climb the walls but as they did that another battery of arrows made many of them fall before they could throw their ropes over the walls. The others replaced the fallen men only to meet a similar fate. At noon, the sun was exuding all its heat, the soldiers were tired and thirst was unbearable. The sergeants of different battalions begged Mujahid Khan for a cease fire. From an apprehension of revolt and rioting, Mujahid Khan ordered cease fire and the Moghul forces started returning to their tents.

The thirsty army ran to the water cans and pots, and a new thought of food, but they remembered the attacks of the last night that had reduced the barns and godowns to mere rubble and ash. The grass for the horses in the stables had burnt too. There was chaos; the hungry army was like a blind elephant. The

Moghul nobles and commanders were afraid of their own soldiers. The new supply will take a while to arrive, who would face the revolt in the battalions. Under these circumstances, the Moghul commanders and sergeants started gathering around Mujahid Khan's tent, who knew why they were there. But what could he do? He was sure that the fresh supplies will take so much time to arrive that a second attack will have to be held for another time. In addition this was not an easy fort to conquer. A victorious man like Alexander the Great too had to sacrifice thousands of soldiers and had to wait for six months before a way was found to get control of the fort. The Khiljis and Toghlaks too had been beaten up badly before they changed their plans and went back to Delhi. Whoever had succeeded to conquer this fort had done it through trickery and deceit. It was impossible to conquer it straight away. It was better to make peace with the Sindhis and send the army to the safety of Lahore and Agra. On the other hand just the thought of Akbar's wrath was enough to sink the hearts of the Moghal commanders. No one in them had the courage to forward this thought even though most of them wanted to return to the lavish life of Agra where parties, money and other riches awaited them. When Mujahid Khan also suggested something similar to this, most of the Moghal commanders showed their assent. They decided to send Dadan with some Moghal commanders with a message of making peace.

When Dadan reached the tent, the defeated look on Moghal faces brought a smile on his face. He was sure that Mujahid Khan was thinking about a respectful way to end this crisis and at the same time show that he was brave and conscientious.

Trying to hide his embarresment and anger Mujahid Khan said, "Sindhi, we do not want any more bloodshed. Therefore, if the Sindhis stop their insurgencies, I, on the behalf of the Indian Emperor am ready to forgive them. We are ready to hand them the governership of Mohankot and Sehwan but on the condition that Sindhis will not lauch a new attack until His Highness can mediate an agreement between the Tarkhans and the Sindhis."

Dadan kept looking at the defeated and arrogant Moghal for a few moments and said politely, "I had submitted earlier that the Sindhis do not wish to fight the Moghal army, and that the Moghals are interfering in Sindh's internal conflicts without a reason. They do not need any permits from the Emperor for Sehwan, Mohankot or other cities, as they belong to them. Talking of insurgencies, they will continue as long as the Tarkhans are there. Even if one Tarkhan exists on this soil, the revolt will not end. I can only assure you that the Sindhis will not attack the Moghals when they are returning."

"But allegiance to the Emperor is a must!" one of the commanders blurted.

"Sindhis may not have hesitated in announcing their allegiance, but since His Highness had announced his support for Mirza Baqi, Sindhis will prefer dying and will not at any cost announce their allegiance."

"But how long will the Sindhis survive against the Moghul empire..." The Rajput soul in Ram Singh was showing in his words.

"Moghul Emperor..."Dadan wanted to say something but suddenly voices of chaos and tyranny in the forces were heard. No one knew what was going on. Mujahid Khan was sure about a revolt in the forces; before he could say anything, a group of royal battalion surrounded the tent and some soldiers came in with drawn swords. No one got a chance to leave. In an instant Haibat Khan entered the tent with his sword drawn too and faced Mujahid Khan. He said, "Mujahid Khan, such a shameful defeat of the Moghul army was not enough for you that you now speak of making peace with the Sindhis!" And then he turned towards the other commanders and nobles present in the tent and addressed them, "You call yourself Moghul nobility! Shame on you; instead of confronting a handful of Sindhis, the Moghul commanders are thinking of leaving for Agra. How will you face His Highness? The entire food supplies of the forces have been destroyed by the Sindhis and instead of thinking and planning about how to feed the men, you are contemplating retreating from the ground. From now

on I shall be the Supreme Commander of this army. Mujahid Khan is under arrest; those of you who are with me raise your hands. I will teach Sindhis such a lesson that they shall never dare to disobey any Moghul Emperor. The entire army is with me. Until our supply lines are restored, for which I have already sent a few men, the food from the personal stores of the nobles, aristocrats, commanders and sergeants shall be distributed among the soldiers. Any commander who objects to that will be handed over to the army."

All the commanders held their heads down. They were already thinking about their fate at the hands of the hungry soldiers. Haibat Khan continued, "I will take Mujahid Khan to His Highness and tell him the whole truth. And I will also tell him of those commanders who have been conniving with him or will do in future. If His Highness finds me guilty, I shall happily face the consequences but I swear to God I shall not let the Moghul Emperor and his army be ridiculed."

The forces were chanting in favour of Haibat Khan, none of the commanders raised as much as a brow and one by one, all of them raised their hands and showed their support for Haibat Khan. Mujahid Khan, Dilawer Khan, Mahmood Khan and Ram Singh were the only four who did not raise their hand.

"From this moment, instead of directly attacking the fort, we shall have a siege around it and the

blockade will be complete, even if we have to sit here for 6 months. Sindhis will soon tire and beg for pardon...”

And then he looked at Dadan and said, “Sindhi, you do not know Haibat Khan. I am aware how and with whose connivance, the Sindhis were able to attack us at night. And I have the authority to hold you accountable. Take this rascal away and tie him up in chains and make sure he is heavily guarded.”

Mujahid Khan’s head was down; within a span of one day this brave supreme commander had been defeated so many times because of his pride and high-handed approach that he looked like a defeated old man. Dadan felt sorry for him. Leaving with the guards, when he passed Dadan, Mujahid Khan whispered to him, “Sindhi, I am sorry I could not keep any of my promises... perhaps that is why God has cursed me.” He covered his eyes to hide his tears and was led away by the guards.

16

The siege by the Moghuls became stricter as days passed by; caravans after caravans fell prey to the soldiers and the city of Sehwan came under a dark spell. A strange unrest was seen in the people but no one said anything. After about a month the food stores were depleted and people realized that they will have to starve. Sodhal's informers kept him informed about the city and no one talked about surrendering to the Moghuls. People had strange feelings, they missed their meals without a wrinkle on their faces, they cursed the Moghuls but they preferred dying over surrender. Sodhal and his men were not able to come to terms with all that; people of this beautiful city were facing these difficulties because of them. They were of the opinion that they should go out and fight the Moghuls but somehow the majority thought that the Moghuls would tire out and leave. In any case, they were so small in numbers compared to the Moghuls that a direct war with them was not possible.

One evening Sodhal summoned a meeting for final consultations, when Aloo informed him about some men from the Moghuls wanted to deliver a message. They were accompanied by three Sindhis as

well. Sodhal had a hunch and for the first time he felt weak. He could place the root cause of his despair but when the Moghuls entered with the Sindhis, their faces told him that his hunch was true. They brought a letter that they gave to him. As Sodhal read the letter, his expression became grim; one of his men could not hold himself and asked, "Sodhal, is everything okay?"

Sodhal did not reply, he simply handed the letter over to him. He too became gloomy while reading it. Akhund Noor Muhammad had written that Sindhis had no reason to fight the Moghul Emperor and so they should make peace with them. This had been decided by all the clans and tribes and carried the seals of the chiefs of those tribes and clans. The Moghuls had demanded that if the Sindhis stopped their fight and hand the fort over to them, they will not harm any Sindhi and everyone shall be allowed to return to their families. Silence and gloom prevailed on the face of all those present in the meeting. After a while, Sodhal broke the ice and said, "Brothers, we shall not get anything from just being disappointed; let us first see what the comrades feel before we send a reply. Sadiq, you be the first and tell us about your men."

Sadiq Soomro was the youngest in age amongst his men. He was well built and a good fighter who relied more on his axe than his sword. The Tarkhans had burnt his entire village to ashes and had hanged

his father in a well after gouging his eyes out. He, like Sodhal, was not a man of too many words.

"Sodhal, my men will never accept a truce, we came out to fight for Sindh and until there is even one foreigner on our land, we will continue our fight."

Sodhal liked this brave man and he did not want to hurt him but this was time to be very clear on this issue. He kept his head low and said slowly, "But when your men will hear about the decision of the chief of Soomro tribe, what will be their choice?"

"What have elders got to do with this conflict? We are Sindhis first and that is what we shall remain. The Soomro clan has nothing to do with all this. All the clans and tribes have a right to decide about their problems but we did not come here on their instructions, neither did they send a message that men, go and fight for Sindh. This war is our war, who can hold the honour of Sindh dear to us. No one is here at war as a Samo, Syed, Lohano etc. And that leaves the issue of truce; if that is what we were to do, we would have done that with Tarkhans. Had we given them what they asked for, they were not mad enough to fight us. We are fighting for our honour and esteem, for our dear motherland. So friends, forgive me but I will fight it to the end no matter how many requests the clans make!" Sadiq was angry and he stood up. He was about to leave when Sodhal held him by his arm and embraced him. "Do not make haste my dear friend. We

can discuss this out, I am with you in this fight but let us see how many will be with us.”

“I am with you.” Qabool Muhammad Samo replied briefly. But it appeared like his words lacked the confidence and commitment. Samoos had recently lost their rule and their clans were gathering in Kachho to prepare for a war for Sindh. The Unars, Junejos, Rahoojos, Samejos and Jarejos were all with the Sama clan. And for someone who had recently lost his hands on power, an offer for governorship of Sindh would not be a small feat. This is why his words lacked conviction. But Sodhal was sure that under any circumstances, Qabool Muhammad will denounce his clan and with stand with him.

Mubarak Shah from the Sayyad clan remained quiet after listening to Sodhal’s question. Tarkhans had not bothered the Sheerazi Sayyads, in fact they had been rewarded at times with ministries and judgeships. The Sayyads had become involved in this war because Sindh was a country that had given them immense respect and for them Sindh was what Iran and Arabia was to their ancestors: and fighting for one’s motherland was in the blood of Iranian and Arabs. The Emperor Akbar had great respect for Sherazi and Herati Sayyads and some of them had been awarded medals of honour by the Emperor. Whether they were allowed to conduct elections, he was not sure. Sodhal sensed his hesitation but just to be sure he asked, “Shah

Sahib, you seem quiet."

"Sodhal, my friend, it is a difficult problem. As far as I am concerned, I will lay down my life for Sindh. But if you talk about my group, half are with me and I cannot be sure about the other half, I can ask if you like?"

"Rupo, how about you?" Sodhal asked.

"Brother, the Hindus are a tame people. They love their motherland but once their chiefs decide otherwise, they will not be prepared to fight. When the Takhans burnt their shops, more than half relocated to either the north or the south. Some went to Punjab while the others headed to Kachh. And if they see that in place of Tarkhans the Moghuls will rule and in Akbar's empire their shops and homes will be safer, they will settle for it. They are business-minded people, so if they see their properties secured, they will forget their love for the country. So my friend, amongst the Hindus, only those will fight who hold their hearts closer to their minds. As for me, my life is with you."

Roopo was among those people who had fought many wars. During the Portuguese invasion, when there were only sounds of burning wood of the houses, it was he who had evacuated the women and children to safety. He had attacked the Portuguese in a way they had no idea where the attacks came from, and even the Tarkhans had acknowledged his bravery.

Sodhal had never imagined Sindh will see a time when people will think of their clans and tribes before their motherland. This was a poison that tasted the most bitter; he could feel that bitterness in him. But what could he do?! This war was his war, that had now become a war of different groups. What had started as a war for Sindh had become a war of clans. He started losing faith in himself and his war. A newfound hatred was evolving in his heart, but he could not place who it was directed against. Perhaps he had started hating himself and to hide that he looked at his friends and comrades. Everyone was looking at Sodhal; that hatred had brought a strange change in his demeanour, for which all his friends blamed themselves. This brave man who the Tarkhans feared, who had forgotten his own family, who beamed like lightning even thinking about Sindh, no one wanted to hurt this man. The only thing that could hurt him was when someone gave importance to his own conflicts and interests over Sindh.

He had waged this war and his soul was injured. His heart anguished and that despair brought blood to his eyes that blurred his vision and from within that blur he said to the Moghuls, "You will certainly get a reply tomorrow."

17

The earth, the skies, the trees, the sand grains and the people of Sindh had neither witnessed a war like this one nor will they see one everafter. When Sodhal and his men marched to the battle ground, the sun hid behind a cloud; as the sun did not wish to see this sun ever set down. A small army of about 10,000 Sindhis was out to fight the 100,000 Moghul soldiers. But what a fight this was?! The Moghuls too had seen hundreds of wars but this one seemed like a war between the earth and the skies. It looked like the Sindhis did not know how to fall. It was like a new Sindhi arose from any wound that a Sindhi was afflicted with. The Moghuls were reminded of the Hindu gods who have 10 heads and numerous arms. And each of these arms of Sindhis was finding 20 Moghuls as their prey. One spear would go through 3 or 4 Moghuls and one axe was harvesting 3-4 Moghul heads. The Moghuls feared their foes but they were stopped from retreating by their commanders. They would come forward but then utter fear would drive them back. The only screams being heard were from the Moghul side; Sindhis throats were unknown to sound now and the only sound that could be heard from them was "Jiye Sindh" when they fell. That

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slogan would instill a new vigour, a kind of reinforced power in them and they would thrash the rank and file of the Moghul army. Many a time scenes arose where the Moghul soldiers would turn back but only to return to fight on their commanders orders.

The sun was about to set, but some Sindhis were still fighting. And when the sun could not bear witness to the scene, it took cover of a dark cloud to weep in loneliness. And then the last Sindhi fell...! It felt like the universe had stopped breathing, a dark spell was cast on the horizon and death reigned. The Sindhis on the walls and pillars of the fort had forgotten to cry over their martyrs. The muezzin forgot to sound the call for prayers. The drumming on Qalander's shrine was quiet for the first ever time. It was a strange mourning, quiet and with absolute silence. It looked like the Sindhis had decided to mourn for ever and after, and this silent mourning will throb like a deep gasp on the conscience of mankind for centuries to come.

The End



Siraj, a friend par excellence, was a towering man of letters respected for his intellect and study of Sindhi language, literature and history. He revolutionized and introduced a fresh and new character to Sindhi journalism, raised its standard of language, content and news reporting. Hilal-e-Pakistan, though being a pro-government organ, adopted an independent approach under Siraj and many a times a thorn for the

government policies. Siraj had the courage of conviction and his toil for truth and perfection was a beacon for others who admired him. His blazing ecstasy for Sindh forced him to write against the injustices and woes of his mother land. It shaped his personality to recede from public life when hypocrisy ruled the roost, and silently but surely he penned his thoughts for the coming generation. His land mark treatise on Sindhi language remains a solid research source for origins of the Sindhi language.

'Echo Is the Call' highlights the atrocities and the brutalities committed by the Afghan invaders when they conquered Sindh and very aptly reflects the miseries Sindh has faced since then, the echo of Abdul Rahim Girhori's prediction reverbrates to the present day and has extended to regions beyond Sindh. This is an apt time for presenting 'Echo Is the Call'.

Abdul Hamid Akhund

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